

'Dark Phoenix' Rises Above Typical Comic Book Action

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Leave it to Marvel Entertainment to produce another “marvel-ous” take on their angst-ridden superhero characters. The latest X-Men film, called the last of this series, is “Dark Phoenix,” and it contains comic book action that is unprecedented for its originality and sheer power. It’s another winner.

The settings of the action ... outer space, an American neighborhood, the streets of New York City and an old fashioned train ... come right out of the movie action playbook, and are followed through with creativity that places the Marvel adaptations firmly at the top of the heap (this is the first directorial effort from longtime X-Men screenwriter Simon Kinberg). This is also a summer movie, emphasizing the machinations of the story rather than the relationships, although there is a enough emotions to argue that lack of balance. The X-Men series of films have always relied on the outsider status of their superhero characters, which has allowed for strong underdog story lines. “Dark Phoenix” is no different, and adds in a Jessica Chastain – doing her best Tilda Swinton – as a cool villain. This is great escapist superhero fare for the summer.

The story begins in 1975, with a car accident (strangely parallel to an incident in the recent “Shazam”) caused by the mind manipulation of Jean Grey (eventually portrayed by Sophie Turner). The child is taken in by Charles Xavier (James McAvoy), who runs a school for the evolving humans with mutant powers. She becomes Xavier’s favorite, and grows into a love interest for Cyclops (Tye Sheridan).



Sophie Turner as Jean Grey in 'Dark Phoenix'

Photo credit: Walt Disney Pictures

In 1992, the young X-Men are called upon to rescue a NASA Shuttle in outer space that has broken down. Beast (Nicholas Hoult), Mystique/Raven (Jennifer Lawrence), and Cyclops lead the team, which includes Jean Grey, whose telekinetic powers keeps the ship together while the rescue takes place. Alone on the shuttle, she absorbs an energy field that heightens her power. This power surge interests an alien race led by a shapeshifter (Jessica Chastain), and its implications will eventually involve Magneto (Michael Fassbender). Dark Phoenix has risen.

There is a lot going on in this latest chapter of X-Men, and a re-watch of the last film ("Apocalypse") might be in order. But it is self contained, and is anchored by the pulse-racing action and Chastain's turn as a cool blonde alien with designs of taking over earth. The timeline of the X-Men series, adjusted in the last film, also gets into the 1990s (although few references are overtly made) and adjusts the mutants from post adolescence to adulthood. This raises the stakes for all concerned, especially the conflicted Charles Xavier and skeptical Magneto, portrayed yet again with full sincerity by James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender.

Sophie Turner (also Sansa in "Game of Thrones") takes advantage of her title role by extending her confusion over the power she possesses. Her subtlety of performance is a highlight, and her motivations are sound ... she also becomes the Yin to Chastain's Yang, and the two of them are literally electric together. There is a woman-centric focus in this chapter, so much so that JenLaw's Raven quips that the X-Men should be renamed to reflect the female kick ass-ness.



Tilda-Be-Proud: Jessica Chastain in 'Dark Phoenix'

Photo credit: Walt Disney Pictures

Since the focus is on action, the narrative is a bit choppy, but that same action provides summer thrills that make this air-conditioned-popcorn comfort a joy to experience. The fight sequences are pure Ameri-cinema, with a middle class neighborhood, 1990s New York City and an exquisitely rendered railway train upping the ante. This is edge of your seat stuff, brought to the screen with less of that computer generated gleam that sometimes takes an audience out of the picture. It's pure comic book glory.

Why not some more references to 1992? What doesn't Professor X wear M.C. Hammer pants? Why doesn't Raven and Jean jam out to Toad the Wet Spocket? Why isn't Beast watching "Law & Order"? Whaaaaa? Man, that show has been on too damn long.

"Dark Phoenix" opens everywhere on June 7th in IMAX, Dolby RPX, 3D and regular screenings. See local listings for theater format and show times. Featuring Sophie Turner, James McAvoy, Michael Fassbender, Jennifer Lawrence, Nicholas Hoult, Tye Sheridan and Jessica Chastain. Written and directed by Simon Kinberg. Rated "PG-13"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [24]
Editor and Film Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [23]

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