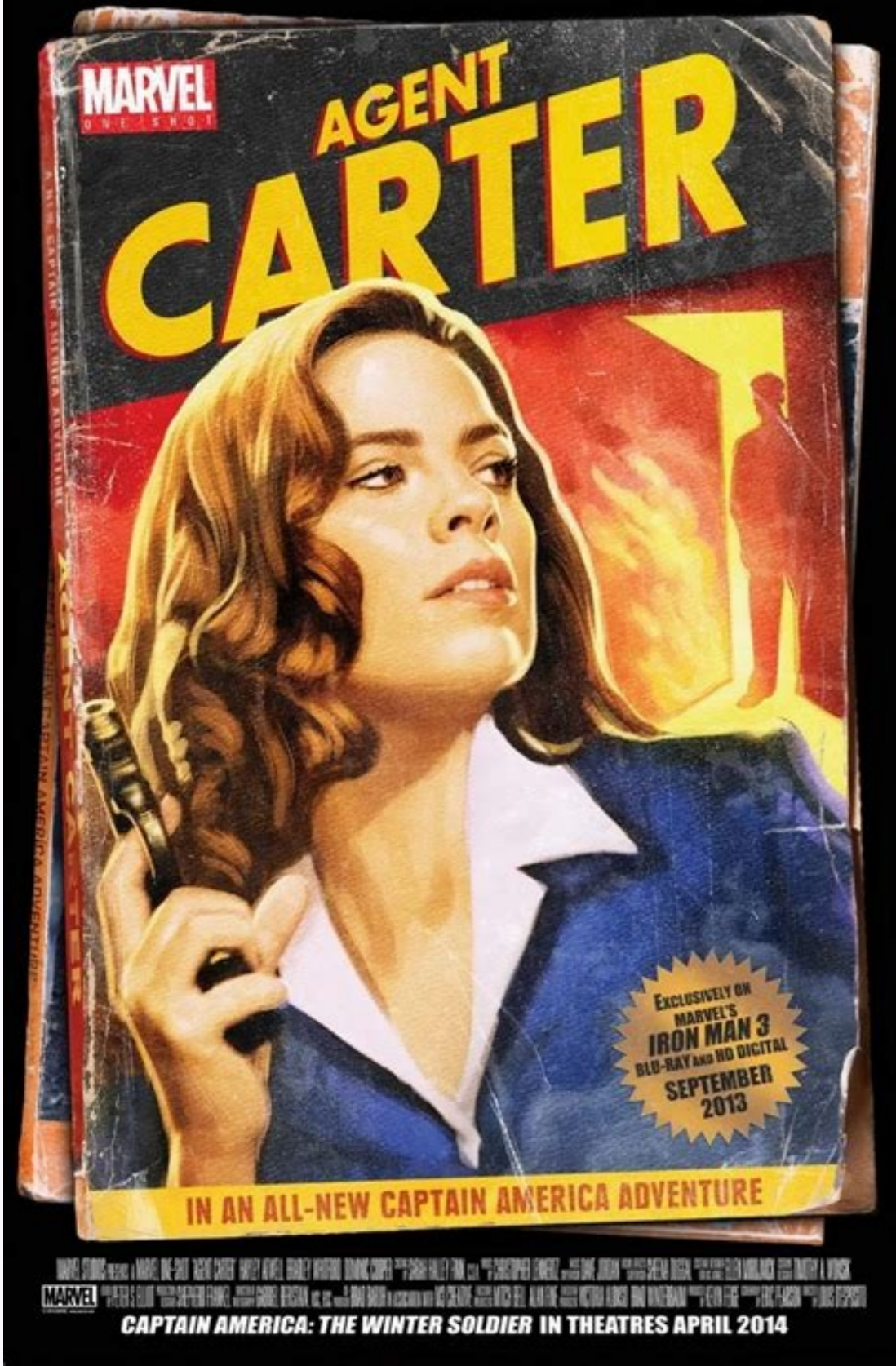


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Walking into Captain America: The First Avenger was something of a daunting prospect for me. As a long-time comic book geek that now earns a few coins reviewing movies, I feel an attachment to comic book flicks. When they are good, shazam! I happily soak up the comicy goodness and go about my merry way, safe in the knowledge that a beloved property from my childhood (and on) has been honored. When it is bad, I take it somewhat personally — as with the cash grab mess of a cinematic turd known as Green Lantern, which hurt me deep inside. And so even though the trailers for Captain America looked good, it was still a tough subject to adapt. You basically have a guy wearing an American flag punching Ratzis in the face in the name of America. It could either be a cool war adventure in the vein of the old serial movie clips, or very, very bad. It could also be problematic for Marvel’s overall plans for world domination by way of uniting the Marvel characters for The Avengers, seeing as how Cap is the heart and soul of the team. All of that is a moot point, as Captain America is easily one of the best superhero films ever made, and just an overall good movie. It doesn’t have the depth and realism that The Dark Knight had, but it doesn’t try to be. Instead it is closer to an old-school serial adventure, and it is just fun to watch from start to finish. Uncle Marvel needs you! The thing about Captain America that really makes it work is that the character of Cap begins as lowly Steve Rogers (Evans), a four-foot, 90-pound asthmatic with a list of medical problems who desperately wants to join the Army—not to kill the enemy, but because he thinks it’s the right thing to do. He is immediately relatable, and likable because he is the underdog that refuses to be cowed no matter what. Rogers’ origins are vital to the way the character develops. It is important to see him from the early moments, so when he goes through Project Rebirth and becomes the super soldier, you can still relate to him. Origin films can easily fall into the pitfalls of being dull because they have a certain number of plot points that they must establish before actually getting to the real story. But in Captain America, watching the puny Steve Rogers transform into the hero is a surprising highlight. While Cap is being big-fied thanks to the efforts of the brilliant and wizened Dr. Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci), who chooses Rogers for the experiment because of his character not his physicality, a secret war is raging in Germany. The Nazi deep science division codenamed Hydra, is quietly working on something under the noses of their Nazi overlords. Led by Erskine’s first failed experiment Red Skull (Hugo Weaving), after years of searching Hydra has discovered a new power source that will change the course of the world, kill the dream of freedom and pretty much every other horrible thing they can think to do to the people of the world. The rest of the story is a war tale by way of the 1950s style, where bad is bad, and good is American. It is a Horatio Alger story of a kid from the bottom made good. Even with his powers, Cap has to wait for his chance to prove himself to the military that sees him as something of a joke. It just reiterates the point that Cap earns his way, and it also keeps the character humble and honest. This is where the screenplay works well. Without going into spoiler territory, the film manages to honor the over-the-top nature of the character, and then moves past it to make it somewhat more believable — or as believable as a guy carrying a shield that can make faces explode by punching them can be (not that he makes faces explode, but he could have). Even the name “Captain America” is rationalized and put into context. But more than that, it focuses the film on Evans, who is likable and charismatic enough through his almost Jimmy Stewart-like belief in the world, that you just can’t help but want to see him succeed. Once Cap hits his stride, he and his team known as the Howling Commandos then begin a fun-filled campaign to wipe Hydra off the map, which kicks off a cinematic trick that has become the scourge of evil groups and high school bullies everywhere — the montage. Years pass, and the narrative picks up again for the climatic battle which brings the film to a satisfying conclusion... in the WWII era. One semi-minor flaw with the film is the final wrap up that sets up The Avengers — it is difficult to discuss it without spoilers. The movie wraps up the main story nicely with a solid conclusion, but the rest is almost an afterthought, grudgingly tacked on. It isn’t a bad conclusion, but the tone is a bit off. I’m nitpicking though. Captain Evans I like Evans, and I like the movies he has been in (for the most part), but I never saw him as Cap. I could get over the physical differences between Evans and the Cap of the comics, but I just never thought of Evans as Captain America. Not my Cap. If you read comics — not just read the odd comic, but followed Marvel comics for any length of time — even if you didn’t like the character, it is impossible to not have formed an impression of Cap. He is at the center of the Marvel universe, and he is more of an icon and a symbol than a character. Evans not only won me over, he will almost certainly find himself vaulted up the A-list star ladder, and will be among the most sought-after actors in Hollywood. Yeah, he’s that good, and it now makes sense why Marvel kept pursuing Evans, even after he repeatedly turned them down. But Evans isn’t the only one that will leave this film in better career shape than he entered it. Although the movie follows predictable — or maybe “traditional” is a better term — patterns, the characters deftly avoid becoming stereotypes. Tommy Lee Jones brings a good balance of humor and gravitas to the role of Col. Phillips, while Hayley Atwell’s strong and self-assured Peggy Carter makes a good foil, and potential love interest when paired with Cap’s naiveté. Dominic Cooper pulls off a good Howard Stark, father of Tony, and all the Howling Commandos each have personality despite very little development. As far as bad guys go, both Weaving and Toby Jones’ Dr. Arnim Zola are fun to watch, and Weaving manages to pull off the necessary gravitas as the Red Skull, a near polar opposite to Cap. But if there is a single breakout performance from the supporting cast, it will be Sebastian Stan as Bucky Barnes. The relationship between Barnes and Rogers is an important one for the film (and for possible future plans with the series). Barnes is Steve’s friend from back in New York when Cap was a runt. He protected him, and when things change and he finds his old friend in a leadership role (and much bigger), their relationship slightly changes in an interesting way that helps highlight that Cap is still the same guy he always was, there’s just more of him now. It would have been nice to see this relationship developed a bit more, but that is a minor gripe and maybe even a grudging compliment, because I wanted more. The CGI diet in keeping with the action and adventure tone, the CGI is mostly kept to a minimum in favor of live effects. There are exceptions—and those exceptions are easy to spot—but mostly the effects are kept to stunts, real explosions and trick photography. But the one thing that will stand out as kind of amazing are the effects that make Chris Evans look like a kid that needs to eat a whopper. It is insane, and it will have people talking. It will also help to make you feel for Rogers, as he continually falls short because he is tiny and sickly and possibly subject to being knocked over by a gust of wind. Women shun him, guys laugh at him and yet he remains a strong and moral character. Portraying that is possible because of the effects to make Evans look tiny before he emerges as a Greek god-like figure. There will doubtless be several “making-of” features on how they pulled off the effects, but the most important thing to note is that it is mostly Evans (they occasionally use a double and add Evans’ features later). Speaking of effects, the 3D is converted in post-production. Johnston took that into account while filming, so there aren’t any issues with the technology, plus he has a good eye for filming action, but the 3D is somewhat unnecessary and the glasses add a dark tint to a film that is lush at times. It feels like a decision that was shoehorned in. The 3D isn’t bad, but it doesn’t add much and has a slight negative effect. Nothing major though. Conclusion Marvel had a lot riding on the success of Captain America: The First Avenger, and not just in a monetary sense. Cap is the heart of The Avengers, and the center of the Marvel Universe. If his movie bombed, the entire Marvel master plan could come crashing down, and fairly or not, the blame would all land at the feet of director Joe Johnston and star Chris Evans. Fans would revile them, the studios would shun them and their careers could be damaged to the point that they would be lucky to end up in the Valley filming dog-food commercials. So no pressure. Ok, so maybe the stakes weren’t quite that high, but a successful Captain America film is vital to the success of The Avengers, which in itself is important to Marvel and all comic book fans, if for no other reason than to justify the awesomesauce that is Marvel’s strategy of combining stars and properties into one coherent universe on film. It is ambitious and gutsy, and if it succeeds, the masterminds will be geniuses. If not, they will be fired and bring shame to their ancestors. Thankfully the concerns are a moot point, because Captain America is good. In fact it is very good. It is not Iron Man, nor is it like Thor. If anything, in terms of superhero movies it most closely resembles Johnston’s The Rocketeer. It is a film deliberately wrapped in the nostalgia of the 40s, during the height of the patriotic push when the world’s enemies were clearly labeled and conveniently all war similar uniforms. It isn’t a subtle film, and the music may sometimes be a bit over the top, but it is attempting to capture the optimistic feel of America after the war as seen through a heroic filter. But really, it is Evans that makes this movie. His portrayal of Rogers is earnest and humble, which is perfect for a guy that embodies pretty much every heroic American ideal. And who punches Nazis in the face with a shield, like a boss. It may not hit the same emotional depths as The Dark Knight, but it is a different kind of movie, and it succeeds almost perfectly in what it attempts to do. There are a few small issues in the film, but they are minor and easily overlooked. And though the competition has been traditionally slim until recent years, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Captain America: The First Avenger is one of the best comic book films ever made, and the best of the Marvel films so far. (Captain America: The First Avenger is rated PG-13 and has a running time of 124 minutes) Editors' Recommendations

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