

Spider-Man

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Once it gets through this awkward stage, however, the movie really takes off. Act One is very much a coming-of-age tale as Peter comes to grips with the changes he's experiencing. The pubescent sense of wonder, humor and giddiness with which he experiments with his new abilities is infectious—he handles his powers exactly as you imagine a high-schooler would.

Maguire excels in this capacity on a number of different levels: a) because he has already delivered acclaimed portrayals of disenfranchised, put-upon youths in films like Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* and Curtis Hanson's *Wonder Boys* b) because he is on the verge of crossing over into more adult roles; and c) because his Peter Parker is one of us—a perfectly human, solidly American hero-in-training, not blessed with the obscene wealth of a Bruce Wayne or the superhuman, extraterrestrial ancestry of a Clark Kent.

Soon, though, the tone of the film darkens as Peter suffers a personal tragedy, and a new menace lays siege to New York: Osborn's experiment gone awry, dubbed the Green Goblin. Peter's graduation from high school, his move into the city with Harry, and his new job as a freelance photographer with the *Daily Bugle* also echo the more adult tone of the second act, as Peter begins to take his personal life and his heroic responsibilities more seriously.

One of the film's real coups is the casting of Dafoe as the Green Goblin. My earliest impressions of Dafoe were his villainous performances in Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire* and William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in L.A.* In the intervening years, he has taken on a number of more sympathetic roles, but his work in 2000's *Shadow of the Vampire* signaled a welcome return to that earlier milieu, and it was just a matter of time before he'd be offered the role of a comic supervillain. He delivers a mercurial, Jekyll-and-Hyde performance here, shifting gears as paranoia and schizophrenia consume Osborn and set the stage for the maniacally lethal Green Goblin. Sadly, the film nearly does him a disservice because, in the guise of the Goblin, his great gaunt face with its jagged smile is covered by a mask that seems superfluous with Dafoe working behind it.

In fact, one scene in which Spider-Man and the Green Goblin exchange dialogue face-to-face is disconcerting—a little too much like looking at static characters in a printed comic-book panel—precisely because you can't see either of their mouths moving beneath their masks.)

Still, any concerns I've noted here are minor in comparison to what Spider-Man accomplishes in setting the tone for the inevitable franchise to follow. (Inevitable because, as I am writing this, reports are already circulating of a \$40 million opening day.) The film dispenses with the juvenile fun and games at the outset, and by the time the end credits roll, it establishes a wealth of dramatic themes, such as the sacrifices made in the face of a hero's awesome responsibility; a brotherly bond/rivalry between Peter and Harry (the latter of whom clearly has deep-seeded father issues); the duality of character that is a staple in the psychology of the comic superhero; and an unresolved love triangle between Peter, Mary Jane and Harry, a nice alternative to the "revolving love interest" policy of most franchise, like the Batman and 007 series.

Of course, these days it's hard to get excited about any film franchise when you consider the numerous pitfalls that can bring about its demise: changes in personnel, both in front of and behind the camera; the meddling of studio executives; the input of too many screenwriters; a tendency toward excess rather than understatement (in casting, in art direction, in special effects, etc., etc., etc.)—many of which contributed to the Batman franchise being driven into the ground. (I could write another 2,000 words on that topic alone, but I'll spare you.)

Suffice it to say that, if Sam Raimi and his young stars commit themselves to following through with this vision—the way Lucas and his *Star Wars* cast did; the way Cubby Broccoli did with both Connery and Moore as his 007s—Spider-Man could certainly prove to have legs as a franchise. Maybe not eight legs, exactly, but legs

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