

Scintillating sequel probes webslinger's humanity

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

Mild-mannered Peter Parker's (Tobey Maguire) private life has become an unmanageable mess in the two years since the fateful accident which left him a half-arachnid and both blessed and cursed with an acrobatic, altruistic alter ego.

For although his secret identity as Spider-Man has enabled him to help put plenty of bad guys behind bars, the constant interruptions of his daily routine to fight crime have taken a devastating personal toll.

The consequences of these competing demands range from falling grades in college to being fired from his job as a pizza-delivery boy to his failure as a free-lance newspaper photographer, except for snapshots taken of the elusive Spider-Man.

Plus, Peter still blames himself for the death of his dear Uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson), and he feels guilty about the present plight of his grieving, suddenly debt-ridden Aunt May (Rosemary Harris), whose bank is foreclosing on her house.

Yet, what frustrates the increasingly introspective superhero the most is that his hope of ever dating the girl of his dreams has all but evaporated, because Mary Jane "M.J." Watson (Kirsten Dunst), has announced her engagement to astronaut John Jameson (Daniel Gillies). And it doesn't help matters that the groom is the son of Peter's boss, J. Jonah Jameson, the cantankerous curmudgeon who runs The Daily Bugle.

As the premise of this alternately brooding and action-oriented sequel is established, we see a Spider-Man in emotional crisis, a kid snared in an existential web spun of his own troublesome neuroses.



Critics say "Spider Man 2" comes through in the clutch, joining the "Shrek" sequel as one of a handful of recent movies whose second installments match or exceed the original.

To complicate matters, he must not only deal with his inner-turmoil, but also take on an equally unstable villain in head-case Dr. Otto Octavius (Alfred Molina), a.k.a. the diabolical Doc Ock.

Kudos to director Sam Raimi for finding a way to improve on the already engaging formula that made his initial screen adaptation of the Marvel Comics adventures such a runaway hit.

Here, he first ensured a certain degree of continuity when he brought back about 20 of the original cast members, including all of the leads. Then, he substantially lessened the contrast between the film's animated and real-life sequences by upgrading the technology used to blend in computer-generated

imagery so imperceptibly.

Next, he sprinkled the production with a generous helping of humorous asides, such as the scene where a tone-deaf Asian-American street performer sings the Spiderman TV show theme with all the unbridled passion of American Idol loser William Hung. But best of all, Raimi kept Spider-Man 2 compelling via another character-driven plot. In fact,

each pivotal role has been imbued with a depth that makes the confrontation of individual issues as riveting as fight sequences.

We see a Peter Parker so devastated by M.J.'s impending wedding that he finds himself momentarily unmasked and unable to shoot his sticky goo from his wrists when transformed into Spider-Man. Much soul-searching ensues. Should he continue his commitment to society or just go for the girl? M.J., in the meantime, despite being both betrothed and a Broadway actress, remains vulnerable to this frustrating friend who still occupies a special place in her heart.

Dr. Octavius is a researcher employed by Harry Osborn (James Franco), Peter's long-time friend. Initially, because of his ability to balance happy home and professional lives, the doctor serves as a sort of role model for our protagonist.

Octavius gives the lad the idea that one day he, too, might be able offset his work with a fulfilling love relationship.

However, such thoughts are put on hold after an experiment with fusion theory goes horribly wrong and the mad scientist loses control of his contraption, morphing into one terrifying adversary.

See Spider-Man wrestling with demons, literally and figuratively.

Excellent (4 stars). Rated PG-13 for stylized action violence.

Jackson records stay unsealed

SANTA MARIA, Calif. (AP) - The judge in the Michael Jackson child molestation case reinforced the wall of secrecy around grand jury transcripts and other evidence Friday and said that trying to ensure a fair trial for such a famous entertainer is "exasperating."

Judge Rodney Melville rebuffed arguments by a media attorney who sought to unseal grand jury transcripts so the public can see whether Jackson is being treated fairly.

In doing so, he suggested that celebrity trials such as Jackson's require a different standard than those of average people.

"The difficulty of seeing that an individual in this country gets a fair trial is exasperating when the individual is known around the world," said Melville.

Jackson, 45, has pleaded not guilty to committing a lewd act upon a child, administering alcohol, and conspiracy to commit child abduction, false imprisonment and extortion.

On Friday, media lawyer Theodore Boutrous Jr., im-

plored Melville to unseal 47 search warrants and the entire grand jury indictment pertaining to Jackson so the public can know the exact charges the entertainer faces and the procedures used to gather evidence.

"The time has come, in this case, to let the sun shine in so the public, and the press as its surrogates, can know what the case is about," said Boutrous, who represents a coalition of media organizations including The Associated Press.

By keeping a tight lid on the case, Boutrous said Melville is allowing Jackson's lawyers to "manage" the release of information, an allegation that brought a harsh response from the judge.

"This is about the court trying to balance First Amendment rights against the rights of Mr. Jackson and the prosecution," Melville said.

"Mr. Boutrous, you know that everything I'm doing is according to the law. I'm being very careful in following the law. Please do not mislead the press about this. I

support the First Amendment."

Outside court, Boutrous told reporters he will consult with his media clients about appealing the judge's refusal to unseal the documents.

Key sections of the indictment against Jackson are blacked out. The names of five alleged co-conspirators remain secret, as do 28 specific acts the prosecution alleges in support of the charges.

Both prosecution and defense attorneys are under a court-imposed gag order — supported by both sides, that prevents them from commenting on any aspect of the case.

The presence of Jackson, who did not attend this hearing, has turned previous sessions into public circuses, with thousands of fans gathering to cheer the entertainer's arrival and vendors hawking souvenirs of the event outside the courthouse.

The judge indicated Jackson would have to be present in court again for an Aug. 16 hearing.

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