

FILM REVIEW

Who's watching the Watchmen?

BY STEVE PERSALL
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Romance tames the beast and director

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Known for his phenomenally successful tough-guy action fare, Hong Kong's Andrew Lau (劉偉強) returns to the big screen with *Look for a Star* (游龍戲鳳), a romantic comedy film about a business tycoon and a cabaret dancer.

Though locked and loaded with a stellar cast that includes Andy Lau (劉德華) and Shu Qi (舒淇), the blockbuster director fails to establish his name in the chick-flick sphere with this effort, because he is unable to save the formulaic story line from making a, well, formulaic film.

In *Look*, Andy Lau plays the handsome, charming billionaire named Sam, while Shu plays the perky Milan, who works as a cabaret dancer and croupier to make ends meet. The two quickly fall in love after a chance encounter in a Macanese casino.

However, Milan, a romanticist who longs for love rather than fame and fortune, begins to have doubts when she uncovers Sam's true identity.

The prenuptial agreement forced upon Milan by Sam's mother, and his connivance in the accord, leaves the bride heartbroken.

Besides the main story focusing on how Sam and Milan overcome the odds, two subplots, which involve Sam's secretary Jo (Denise Ho, 何韻詩) and Lin Jiu (Zhang Hanyu, 張涵予), an honest worker from Shandong Province as well as Sam's chauffeur (Dominic Lam, 林嘉華) and single mother Shannon (Zhang Xinyi, 張歆藝), are introduced as variations on the rich-guy-marries-poor-girl drama.

Director Lau ingeniously sets the film mainly in Macau, whose Portuguese-style churches, cobbled streets and grand casinos provide a fanciful feel.

But the footage of Shu and Andy Lau scooting around the city's enchanting vistas isn't enough to lift the film from mediocrity. Crosscutting three plots, the narration feels messy and is at times incoherent, while plot devices such as a televised confession of love and the appearance of a cockhorse in a park appear tired and contrived.

Film Notes

WATCHMEN

DIRECTED BY: ZACK SNYDER

STARRING: PATRICK WILSON (DAN DREIBERG/NITE OWL II), JACKIE EARLE HALEY (WALTER KOVACS/RORSCHACH), MALIN AKERMAN (LAURIE JUPITER/SILK SPECTER II), BILLY CRUDUP (DR MANHATTAN/JON OSTERMAN), MATTHEW GOODE (ADRIAN VEIDT/OZYMANDIAS), JEFFREY DEAN MORGAN (EDWARD BLAKE/THE COMEDIAN), CARLA GUGINO (SALLY JUPITER/SILK SPECTER), STEPHEN MCHATTIE (HOLLIS MASON/NITE OWL), MATT FREWER (EDGAR JACOBI/MOLOCH THE MYSTIC)

RUNNING TIME: 163 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

NOTE: IN TAIWAN, THE COMPLETE VERSION OF WATCHMEN IS SCREENING IN IMAX FORMAT ONLY AND IS RATED R (RESTRICTED TO 18 YEARS AND OVER). THE VERSION SHOWING IN ALL OTHER THEATERS HAS BEEN MODIFIED TO GAIN THE LOWER RATING OF PG (RESTRICTED TO 12 YEARS AND OVER)

about its social importance, it loses steam. There isn't enough room in one movie for all of Moore's backstories, making Armageddon personal. Yet it marches along, loud, bloody and proud, confident that viewers who matter can fill in gaps. More sound and fury, signifying what only fanboys and fangirls understand.



The cast of the Warner Bros movie *Watchmen*, from left, Jeffrey Dean Morgan as The Comedian, Malin Akerman as Silk Spectre II, Billy Crudup as Dr Manhattan, Matthew Goode as Ozymandias, Patrick Wilson as Nite Owl II and Jackie Earle Haley as Rorschach.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Superheroes have become a rather dull lot, in a personality sense. How much vengeance for murdered relatives or, in Iron Man's case, rearranged priorities, can one genre sustain? Absent a fresh face like Tony Stark's, or a magnificent villain like Heath Ledger's Joker, superhero movies are all sound and fury signifying box office.

Which is why Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* thrills, at least the first half of its epic running time. This is a movie unafraid of catering to a narrow audience that pined through Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel as if it were a Dead Sea scroll.

Anyone coming along simply for a roller coaster ride is out of luck. *Watchmen* is the anti-superhero flick, as off-the-hook serious as the equally deconstructing *Mystery Men* was silly.

I know from flipping through the comics that Snyder's movie is reverent to its dense source, although softening the apocalyptic finale a bit. Theaters will be filled this weekend by much more slavish readers, who will call this a masterpiece or feel content that Snyder did the best anyone could with this material.

I'll defer to admitted *Watchmen* fan and colleague Eric Deggans about the deep political meanings of an alternate universe set in 1985, in which Richard Nixon is a five-term president and the Vietnam War was won in a week. Like most sci-fi, *Watchmen* is steeped in social and political allegory. Unlike most sci-fi, Moore's vision is exceedingly nihilistic.

Victory in Vietnam was achieved by two Watchmen — the nuclear mutant Dr Manhattan (Billy Crudup in gloriously

blue motion-capture animation) and the sociopathic Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), whose cold-blooded nature likely hastened passage of the Keene Act outlawing masked vigilantes.

Crimefighters cast out left the Watchmen dysfunctional. Dr Manhattan lives a godlike existence as an Army weapon, unable to connect with humans, even his lover Silk Spectre II (Malin Akerman), who turns to Nite Owl II (Patrick Wilson) for companionship. He has gone soft since hanging up his cape, bored by inactivity and sexually impotent.

There's Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley), a holdout against the Keene Act whose continued vigilantism gets personal when the Comedian is murdered. Least of all, there's Ozymandias (Matthew Goode), who never lives up to his billing as the world's smartest man, except for the fortune made by exploiting his past. *Watchmen* doesn't have a plot as much as origins

lore and super-soap opera, dovetailing into a wan finale.

Wading through personal conflict is rewarded with brilliant set pieces that leap off the screen: opening credits superbly establishing an altered time and place; Rorschach's graphically violent prison stint; Dr Manhattan's self-exile on Mars; and the Comedian's brutally superhuman murder. Nobody gets shortchanged in the action department.

Haley has the meatiest role, a seething, *Taxi Driver*-style avenger of morality whose mask shifts with his mood. Morgan's Comedian is the most charismatic Watchman — think of beefy, belligerent Robert Downey Jr — although his amorality is tough to cheer. Other characters' more humane problems and performances are eclipsed by Rorschach and Comedian's twisted vigor and the impressive destruction around them.

When *Watchmen* becomes deluded

Film Notes

LOOK FOR A STAR (游龍戲鳳)

DIRECTED BY: ANDREW LAU (劉偉強)

STARRING: ANDY LAU (劉德華) AS SAM, SHU QI (舒淇) AS MILAN, DENISE HO (何韻詩) AS JO, ZHANG HANYU (張涵予) AS LIN JIU, DOMINIC LAM (林嘉華) AS TIM

RUNNING TIME: 116 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN CANTONESE AND MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY