

“SUPER” (Film Review)

Written by Allan Dart
Friday, 01 April 2011 12:10



James Gunn’s SUPER (opening today in limited release from IFC Films) is a very violent, often darkly funny, frequently excessive and extreme, occasionally touchingly and affecting movie that is as quirky, crazy and unstable as its main character. It’s an appropriately messy film, with its fair share of topsy-turvy tonal shifts and erratic jumps from the blackly humorous to brutal, graphic bloodshed. But people simply saying it’s another KICK-ASS are missing the point.

SUPER isn’t just a comic-book film. In fact, the movie wears its sad-sack-loser-turned-superhero premise like a comics-hero costume in order to hide its true identity: SUPER is a breakup movie. It has more in common with BLUE VALENTINE, except your Ryan Gosling in this flick is Rainn Wilson, suited up in homemade superhero duds and dealing with his splitsville from Liv Tyler by brandishing a wrench and splitting open evildoers’ skulls in an attempt to win his wife—and his life—back.



After an awesome and entertaining animated opening-credits sequence, we meet Frank

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(Wilson), a short-order cook at a greasy-spoon diner whose marriage to his ex-addict wife Sarah (Tyler) is more than just on the rocks—it’s over. Sarah has relapsed to doing drugs again, has zero interest in Frank socially or sexually and abruptly leaves him one day for the loathsome drug dealer Jacques (an entertaining Kevin Bacon, having fun playing a dirtbag). Devastated, distraught and completely lost, Frank finds motivation and inspiration in the All Jesus Network’s Christian-superhero TV show THE HOLY AVENGER (with Nathan Fillion cameoing as the pious do-gooder), and decides to fight back by assuming the superheroic alter ego of The Crimson Bolt.

This is where the KICK-ASS comparisons come in. I’m not saying that SUPER isn’t a superhero story, but the films couldn’t be more different. In fact, in addition to BLUE VALENTINE, SUPER has some things in common with SUCKER PUNCH. In that movie (which I did not like at all), teenager Babydoll deals with the depressing and painful reality of her situation (being sent to a mental institution where she’s going to be lobotomized) by imagining a fantasy world in which she and her fellow inmates are “empowered” as action heroines who must complete five missions in order to escape. In SUPER, Frank envisions a different type of fantasy world—one in which he convinces himself that Sarah has been abducted by the villainous Jacques, and he therefore must save her by assuming the mantle of The Crimson Bolt.

Watching Zack Snyder’s film, I didn’t buy for one second that a 20-year-old “girl” facing the perforation of her frontal lobe would conjure up a mental milieu in which she wears fishnets and shows cleavage while fighting dragons and robots. But I do believe in Frank’s fantasy. SUPER is a film told from a man’s point of view, but unlike SUCKER PUNCH, it’s honest and up-front: What guy whose girlfriend has just left him (and for another dude) hasn’t delusionally dreamed up imaginary situations where he can be the hero, “save” his squeeze and win her back?

There’s a great line in BLUE VALENTINE in which Michelle Williams’ character—whose five-year marriage is at its end—says, “How can you trust your feelings when they can just disappear like that?” And the same is true of relationships where the *other* person’s feelings just disappear like that. When Sarah vanishes from Frank’s life, his reality is shattered. There’s a really good, sad and funny scene where Frank talks to God and vents his self-loathing while beseeching Him how the one, the only thing he wants in his pathetic life is for Sarah to come back to him. And there’s an equally effective, poignant and sadly amusing scene where Frank confronts Sarah and her new beau at Jacques’ car and ineffectively and pitifully pounds on the windshield, pleading for her to return. Frank’s universe has been upended, and his way of righting it and coping with his suffering is to divide the world into black and white, good and evil, where he can fix not only his life and marriage, but all the wrongs in this world. Enter the Crimson Bolt.

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However, SUPER isn't all touchy-feely, horror hounds. That's where the wrench and Ellen Page's Libby/Boltie come in. Because SUPER is also an *angry* film—one that completely understands the confusion, pain and choler a breakup can incite in a person. Frank is outraged and passionately pissed off, and he expresses his fury by taking action against “evildoers”: You are not supposed to molest children, cut lines or key cars! If you do, you will face the wrath of the Crimson Bolt. And his wrench. And Boltie.

Gunn comes from the Troma universe (he co-wrote TROMEO & JULIET, and Lloyd Kaufman cameos in SUPER), and when Frank wields that wrench, he does *a lot* of damage. Skulls are split. Faces are whacked. Blood is shed. In very violent and often Troma-tic ways. And when comic-book-shop employee Libby finally compels Frank to let her be his sidekick Boltie, the red really starts flying! Unbeknownst to Frank, the tiny and sweet-looking Libby has a homicidal side that she's eager to tap into, and she's not afraid to drive a car into somebody's legs if that's what the situation calls for.

While I imagine certain horror fans will appreciate that gore is one of the main ingredients in the cinematic olio that is SUPER, I had problems with some of it. Frank choosing a heavy wrench as his weapon didn't work for me. When he slashes a line-cutter's face up with it, I winced, and didn't laugh. Some will, but I didn't. And Libby's passion for vicious vengeance is sometimes amusing, sometimes not. SUPER is a movie whose tone often shifts suddenly—and not always to good effect. The movie and its superhero protagonists can be mean-spirited. But they can also be funny and endearing. I think a different, less damaging tool—and less graphic violence—would've made for a more balanced film. I'm not saying nix the sanguine, but SUPER's horror and humor are unevenly integrated.

I also would've liked to see Frank and Libby's characters fleshed out a little more, and for Libby to have teamed up with the Crimson Bolt earlier. Frank is on a mission, he has a code, he enforces it. But when Wilson (a good actor, great in THE OFFICE, but when it comes to warmth and sympathy, he doesn't really spring to mind) has the opportunity to let us see beneath the Bolt and Frank's strangeness and witness his pain and how lost he is, he sells it. More passages like that would've strengthened SUPER's sentimental side, and although Page has fun with the lethal and hyperactive Libby, I wanted to know a bit more about what drives her murderous and superhero-obsessed ways.

But that's what the film isn't. What SUPER *is* may be far from perfect, but it's a good, flawed, personal movie. And I *enjoy* that it's messy.

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Relationships are messy. Breakups are messier. And SUPER isn't simply about breakups or any one thing. I'm sure I'll read reviews about its religious undertones and other subtexts. SUPER just feels like a project where the filmmaker had something inside him that he passionately needed to convey. I'm not going to pretend to know what Gunn had in mind while writing it (supposedly he penned it seven or eight years ago), and I'm not going to assume the end of his marriage to actress Jenna Fischer influenced it. And don't let me mislead you—SUPER isn't all BLUE VALENTINE and saccharinely sentimental about loving and losing and moving on. It is about that, but it's also bloody, anarchic, outrageous, entertaining and cathartic. So if Frank needs a wrench to get through a breakup, who am I to judge if it gets the job done?



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