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'The Hobbit' Wanders Too Far From Its Own Creative Shire

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Balin, Dwalin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, Fili, Kili, Oin, Gloin, Nori, Dori and Ori are 12 dwarfs tempting fate. (And their names are kind of cool, too.) Led by Thorin, son of a fallen king who, like many other dwarfs long, long ago, lost his life in a most bloody battle between their enemies, the Orcs (their ugly trumps their nasty), these eager “dwarriors” boldly set out on a mission to reclaim their lost dwelling on The Lonely Mountain in Middle Earth. They seek the help of a wizard named Gandalf, who, in turn, opts to bring a reluctant hobbit along for the ride.



Warner Bros.

And so goes the premise of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (**/12 out of four), the much-anticipated, big-screen adaptation of author J.R.R. Tolkien's revered classic. It's a fine premise and, on paper, sounds downright inviting. Who doesn't like to root for wayward souls trying to find their way home again? But director *Peter Jackson*'s prequel to his award-winning *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) trilogy, surprisingly, lacks the one thing that made his previous works so compelling: heart.

LOTR so wonderfully managed to spark an interest for the mission at hand for the innocent hobbit, Frodo (Elijah Wood) et al. Here? Not so much. We don't quite feel enough care or concern for the film's main protagonist, Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) nor the seemingly fierce, chief dwarf Thorin (Richard Armitage). And that ... is *The Hobbit's* biggest downfall. What you are left with—or, I should say, what you feel you have walked away from—is an intense series of scenes (some too bloated and gimmicky) strung together in a two-hour plus spectacle that detracts rather than attracts our attention to one singular core mission we can raise our collective fists up in the air and cheer for.

That said, *The Hobbit* is not unbearable. It's watchable. (Unless, that is, you are among the few jazzed about the much-hyped 48 frames-per-second 3D/IMAX excursion. That rendition has

generated some bad buzz—doubling the projection rate has reportedly made some moviegoers “ill.” One last thing: the 48 fps sometimes tends to make the characters look too “gamey.” Or, in 2012 speak, Xbox.)

So, what stands out?

The film’s art direction, cinematography, costumes, sets, animation and a bounty of other special effects are some of the best you will find in film today. Like Lord of the Rings, the sweeping visuals of Middle Earth are both mesmerizing and haunting, depending on the setting.

Acting wise, [Ian McKellen](#)’s Gandalf is the most grounding force throughout the romp. Both the actor and the character anchor much of the plot and there are a number of scenes in which McKellen’s impeccable charm offers levity, and even humor, where it’s desperately needed. And then there’s the introduction of another wizard, Radagast The Brown (Sylvester McCoy), whose whimsical bond with the animal kingdom (he rides a sleigh pulled by large rabbits), is a refreshing surprise. It’s also nice to see Gandalf’s wizardry come into play a bit more here, especially in the film’s final moments, which deliver a fascinating, well choreographed good vs. evil battle—although it lacks the punch of what we’ve already experienced in LOTR, it ultimately makes up for with magical whimsy.

And say hello (again) to Gollum: Andy Serkis superbly reprises his role (with the help of Bette Davis Eyes special effects and all that) as the riddle-happy yet troubled creature who stumbles

upon a lost Bilbo. Of course, as many “Hobbit” devotees already know, Bilbo finds that dreaded gold ring that Gollum held—a prelude for all the horrific events to follow in LOTR. The combination of the enhanced special effects and Serkis’ refined performance give us a more animated—literally—Gollum than we have ever seen before.

Elves Elrond (Hugo Weaving) and Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) are on hand—Rivendell has never looked more inviting—and Saruman (Christopher Lee) is here in suspicious splendor. (We know how evil he becomes later on.)

Of significance is the animosity between the Orcs and the Dwarfs. The backstory is compelling—and, to a lesser extent, the friction between the Elves and the Dwarfs, too—but screenwriters Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Peter Jackson and Guillermo del Toro (yes, four of them), fail to truly give us the much-needed driving force behind Thorin’s (Armitage) task: reclaiming The Lonely Mountain, which, folklore tells us, is now occupied by a monstrous dragon. The writing team also fails to make us truly believe Thorin’s disappointment in having Bilbo as part of the collective mission. (Remember the unrelenting angst of Viggo Mortensen in LOTR? It’s not present here.)

That overall lack of emotional intensity—the ability to really connect to the characters you are watching and root for them—sends this *Hobbit* spiraling far away from a more winning creative core. Two more big-screen outings follow (in

2013 and 2014) but unlike LOTR, you walk away from this movie accepting that fact rather than really feeling genuinely excited about it.

An interchange between Gandalf and Thorin sums up why audiences will flock to this endeavor: “Where did you go to ... ?”

Thorin asks a long-absent Gandalf upon his return to the clan. To which Gandalf responds, “To look ahead.” Thorin shoots him a look: “And what brought you back ... ?”

“Looking behind.”



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