The summer blockbuster season is officially underway with the first mega-film in what is expected to be a HUGE summer for big time motion pictures. And like with any significant new releases, we dispatched our main man Mitch out to the theaters this weekend to give us the 411 on *Spiderman 3*, which opened to monster box office figures.

The Summer Blockbuster Season is officially underway with the first behemoth in what is sure to be a record breaking summer; the final arc in director Sam Raimi's vision of the Marvel Comic's most famous character. And like all popcorn fare, most of the "serious" critics are already at full whine. Let them bellyache all they want; "Spider-Man 3" is a rip-roaring adventure featuring some of the best CGI effects ever brought to the screen, combined with excellent acting, loads of action, and enough of a storyline to hold everything together.

The natural question everyone will ask is "is it as good as the other two?". And while the answer is to that is "no", it is still far superior to any superhero movie since "Batman Begins". There is no rapid decrease in quality, as was seen in "Superman 3" or "X-Men United", where the first two movies were exceptional, adding to the disappointment in the lameness of the third. With the Spider-Man series, the first movie was great, and the second built on that momentum. The problem with the third is that Sam Raimi seems to have ran out of places to go as far as character development is concerned, so we get quantity over quality in the shape of four distinct villains for Peter Parker to battle, one of them being himself.

The movie starts with a bang; a dizzying rooftop chase of our hero by the New Goblin. As

seen at the end of “Spider-Man 2”, Harry Osborn discovered his father’s secret lair, and had vowed vengeance upon his former best friend, blaming him for his father’s death. Now, using the same technology and super-strength formula, Harry flies through the air on his skateboard-on-steroids machine, lobbing bombs and blades at an uncostumed Parker. Of course Peter escapes, with the temporary resolution being a little too convenient, but it does allow the focus to change to other problems.

The main problem is that Spider-Man has become a hero, and the adulation has went to Peter’s head, making him oblivious to the change of events in girlfriend Mary Jane Watson’s life. While Spider-Man is receiving the key to the city, MJ is dealing with major career setbacks. When Spider-Man allows newcomer Gwen Stacy (Bryce Dallas Howard, almost unrecognizable in a blonde wig) to re-create the famous upside down kissing scene from the first movie in front of an adoring audience, Mary Jane is devastated.

Confounding his problems are two other villains. Flint Marko is a two bit escaped convict who stumbles into one of those weird science experiments, and rather than getting annihilated, he becomes the Sandman, a being able to shape shift into a sandstorm or a gigantic monster. It is also revealed that he was the man who actually did kill Peter’s beloved Uncle Ben, and that brings about all the wrath that Spider-Man can muster. Wrath that is further fueled by his new black costume, which was formed by the introduction of some living black goop from outer space; a symbiotic creature that increases Spider-Man’s powers, but also infects his spirit.

Here is where Tobey Maguire shines, presenting Peter not as the geeky do-gooder we’ve seen in the past, but as a man giving in to his base emotions and letting them control him. Using a sneer not before seen (as well as some really tacky bangs the hairstylist dreamed up to represent “bad Peter”), Maguire gives Peter a nasty, vulgar edge. Not just content to seek revenge against the Sandman, Peter is not above any sort of spiteful move. He humiliates a rival photographer (Topher Grace), and shows up at Mary Jane’s workplace to flaunt his new found “style” to embarrass her as well.

Peter’s realization of his problems, and the steps he takes to redeem himself set the stage for the third act, a visually stunning battle amongst the New York skyscrapers as Spider-Man must out-fight and out-wit foes that appear to be substantially more powerful.

That's a lot going on, and the main problem with the movie. It's very hard holding any continuity as it frantically skips from plot line to plot line. Some of the actors are good enough to still shine despite this. Foremost is Thomas Hayden Church as Marko/Sandman. His weathered, hound dog looks and melancholy voice, and aided with the plot device of having a sick daughter, all combine to make his character much more sympathetic. James Franco also does an excellent job with the warring emotions inside of Harry Osborn, and his Goblin is a much more nuanced performance than the over-the-top rantings of Willem Dafoe in the first movie.

But others suffer from having so many characters, plot twists, and action sequences crammed into the 140 minutes. Topher Grace's Eddie Brock is never anything other than a loud mouthed hustling punk. Grace has proven in "In Good Company" that he is a much better actor than the circumstances here have allowed. Kirsten Dunst also comes out on the short end of the stick, pretty much confined to either pouting, crying, or screaming in every scene she is in. But at least she gets enough time to exhibit more than one emotion; Bryce Dallas Howard seems to only be there to look pretty and smile.

Not all the small roles are wasted. Elizabeth Banks makes the most of her three scenes as Betty Brant, the devilishly sly secretary at the Daily Bugle. Also at the Bugle, J.K. Simmons' extraordinary J. Jonah Jameson is underutilized, but he still can steal any scene he is in as the arachnophobic editor-in-chief. And speaking of stealing scenes, what Sam Raimi film would be complete without a hilarious cameo from Bruce Campbell? This time, he's a bumbling maitre d' with a bad French accent that would have made Peter Sellers proud.

Despite the shortcomings, the movie does succeed on a level higher than just "action escapism". And this is due to Raimi's focus into the darker recesses of men's psyches. Parker, Osborn, Marko, and Brock all have to face the darker sides of themselves and decide if they will continue being driven by those more animalistic impulses, or if they can regain their humanity. The four of them reach their final points by starkly different roads, with none of them ringing truly false…even the fate of the purely altruistic Eddie Brock.

That has been Raimi's skill in the previous two movies…having villains that have a soul, but

are twisted by power. In this one, Peter Parker himself becomes the man who is tested, and who ultimately must find the moral fiber to prevail.

It is said that there will be more Spider-Man movies; but it is doubtful that the original team of Raimi, Maquire, and Dunst will return. If that is true, then I seriously doubt that the next one(s) will be half as good as what we have seen from the first three. Hopefully the producers will wait several years, allowing for the type of reset of the series that worked for “Batman Begins”, “Superman Returns”, and James Bond in “Casino Royal”. Unfortunately, I fear that the lure of $400 million box offices will be too much, and the next time we see the Web-Crawler, the movie will be just another “Batman and Robin” debacle.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs).