The Summer Blockbuster Season has begun with a Bang, as "Iron Man" totally destroyed at the box office, raking in more in its first weekend than any non-sequel movie other than the first "Spider-Man". Box Office is one thing, but was the non-traditional choice of Robert Downey Jr. a hit or a miss? The critics say "yes", but what does Mitch think?

The Summer Movie Season has started off with a Bang. "Iron Man", the first presentation of Marvel Studios (the other movies with Marvel superheroes were made by other companies), is not only the best picture so far in 2008, it is also the best Superhero movie since "Batman Begins", and it features what I consider the best performance I have ever seen from an actor in this film genre by Robert Downey Jr.

"Iron Man" is not one of the more well known characters in the Marvel Stable of characters; and that lack of familiarity for the average movie-goer is a positive. We aren't holding the casting and script to as high of expectations as might be seen from more iconic heroes such as Spider-Man, X-Men, or the Fantastic Four. This works in the favor of director Jon Favreau, as it gives him more free reign to get right into the story, and less need to spend time placating the die hard fans.

For the story itself, it is also unique in the Super-Hero world; it is centered about

an over-40 hero. Billionaire Tony Stark is not only a genius inventor of weapons, he is also a complete and utter louse. A boozing womanizer, Stark revels in his celebrity status and his riches, caring little for anyone else's opinion of him. Included among those closest to him and used by him are his deceased father's friend Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), who now serves as his mentor; Air Force Lt. Col Jim Rhodes (Terrence Howard), his liaison to the military, and his trusty and underappreciated assistant Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), who often has the unfortunate task of "taking out the trash", by seeing that Stark's conquests are sent packing the next morning.

All Superhero movies must have a moment where the Hero is Born...or, in this case, made. That comes in Afghanistan, where Starks is ambushed, wounded, and captured. Forced by his captors to re-create one of his most lethal weapons, Stark, aided by Dr. Yinsen (Shaun Toub), a fellow captive, instead sets to work creating what will be the first version of his Super-Suit, powered by what appears to be a miniature nuclear-type generator that is imbedded in his chest. Seems that Tony caught so much small shrapnel in the ambush that he must have some sort of electromagnetic device working 24/7 to keep the small pieces away from his vital organs. No, that didn't make much sense to me, either...but it's a piece of willful suspension of logic needed to advance the story.

Using the suit to make his escape, Stark is a changed man, especially after seeing what his weapons were doing to innocent people. As one might guess, this doesn't make his board of directors happy when the "Merchant of Death" decides to take a vacation from the business of killing people.

So it's time for a semi-retirement to his enormous Malibu home, where he sets about making a much better version of the suit, with the help of his A.I. house system, Jarvis. The use of Jarvis was inspired filmmaking, as this gives Downey Jr. someone to talk to as he is "alone". Of course, it also helps the film that the computer was programmed with every bit of Downey's sardonic humor.

It also makes things more interesting when Stark is behind the mask. Unlike

Spider-Man, who is just seen as the wise-cracking hero when he is masked, Favreau often takes us behind the mask with Stark, showing his face while he communicates with Jarvis, Potts, or Rhodes even while going about his hero-business.

But for everything that Favreau does right, this movie would be nothing without the superb performance from Robert Downey Jr. Simply put, this is an acting job worthy of Oscar consideration, not some mail-it-in routine straight out of The "Superhero 101 Acting School" (see also; Clooney, George). Favreau had to push the studio executives hard to get them to accept Downey, and his vision and their reluctant faith have paid off in spades. Downey brings the perfect blend of pathos, sarcasm, ego, grit, and anguish to the role. Of course, Downey's battle with his own addictions and demons are well known, which makes him the ideal choice to play a seriously flawed, supremely gifted man who loves the limelight, and has problems resisting all of the temptations it brings. Downey is completely fearless in the role, letting all of his past experiences guide him as he puts the pedal-to-the-metal and never lets up an inch.

More than any other Super-Hero movie I have seen, this is almost exclusively about one man. Other films of the genre focus on a group of heroes, or place the villain at the center of attention. Here, probably 80% of the movie is about Stark. Even the main villain, which Iron Man must battle and defeat in the climatic action piece, is not seen until near the end. And while "Iron Man" has a cast of excellent actors in the supporting roles, they are only performing that task...supporting Downey.

What Stark is, more than anything else, is a superhero for the non-teen set. Even with the comic book icon that is most like Iron Man...the non-super powered billionaire crime fighter Batman...is traditionally shown as much younger, in his late 20s to early 30s. As played by Downey, Stark is much more comfortable with his age, and even once Stark has had the epiphany that puts him on the hero-track, he is not filled with despair or deep psychosis. He is still an egotistical hedonist. He just has a slightly better perception of morality than before.

That is not to say that "Iron Man" is just interested in showing off the talents of one of our better actors. The action sequences are thrilling as well, and the special effects are amazing. Favreau balances it all with a skill level that I did not know he had. This film is a perfect mixture of drama and comedy; kick-ass action and nail biting suspense...and at also has a unbelievable Heavy Metal soundtrack.

It may be the smartest superhero movie ever made...and it has reinvigorated the box office after a slumber of several months.

Note: You might want to stick around after the credits for a one-minute final scene that will definitely spark your interest.

My rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)