Marvel superhero movies are in general a very mixed bag. Yes, there are the huge hits with guaranteed big audiences like X-Men and Spider-Man, but the rest have been very much hit or miss. On the positive side was Iron Man, which was a rousing success. In the middle was the Hulk, which did OK with both the 2003 movie with Eric Bana in the lead role and the Edward Norton effort from 2008, as both earned a little over $130 million at the box office.

And then there were the flops; both critically and financially (and often both). Fantastic Four, Daredevil, Ghost Rider, and (especially) Elektra.

So here they come again with one of the more obscure superheroes in the Marvel pantheon; Thor. First of all, this would probably confuse most people who have never read comic books, but are aware of the myths of the Norse Gods and of Thor, the God of Thunder, who was the most well known. Those types would by thinking “He’s also a superhero? What’s next? Poseidon teaming up with Aqua-Man?”

Problem number 2: Even for those who have read comic books in the past (or present), Thor isn't one of your headliners of the Superhero Universe. After all, how often do you see Sheldon Cooper wear a Thor shirt on "Big Bang Theory"? And that is because Thor is a pretty boring superhero, at least in my opinion. He's a bigger boy scout level bore than Superman ever thought about being…with none of the humor. He doesn't have a really cool back story like being the sole survivor of a planet exploding, or a victim of discrimination due to being a mutant, or a major guilt-factor playing with every move he's made after being bitten by a radioactive spider.

Nope…Thor just pontificates a lot (in the comic books, anyway), and in general acts like a pro athlete in terms of his high opinion of himself. This condition is quite similar to that exhibited by LeBron James. When everyone has been worshiping you from the time you were old enough to walk, you tend to put yourself at the top of the food chain, and irk other people with your arrogance.

So…with all of this as a background, why the hell did someone green light this film?

Simple answer; to make a boatload of money next year with "The Avengers", the first "Super Hero All Star Movie". That film will feature Iron Man, the Hulk, Captain America, and Thor as the major players. So in order to properly promote undying interest between now and then, Marvel Studios must first put out a movie for the two members who haven't yet been on film; hence we get both Thor and Captain America movies in the summer of 2011.

All of this had me dreading even the concept of this movie when it first was announced. The only thing that gave me any hope at all was when I learned who was to be the director: Kenneth Branagh…certainly not the kind of director who usually helms superhero flicks.

Over 500 words into the review, and I'll finally start talking about the movie itself.

It's not bad.

Branagh has truly done a magnificent job in bringing this pondering personage of Comic Book Geekdom meets Ancient Mythology to life, aided by a stellar cast that does (relatively) little over-acting, turning a movie with the potential for so much camp and cheese into a well crafted morality play.

In fact, Branagh was the perfect choice, as “Thor” works so well due to the Shakespearian touches put into place by the classically trained Shakespearian actor Branagh and the screenwriters. “Thor” actually becomes a popcorn flick with loftier ambitions of more impressive themes such as pride, humility, paternity and honor, and includes a villain that is far more complex than the genre usually produces.

There are two major locations to this film, in the magical land of Asgard and in the desert of New Mexico. We start in Asgard as we get the backstory of King Odin’s (Anthony Hopkins) reign, and how it was that Odin and his people saved Earth back in the 10th century from a race of creatures called the Frost Giants (which is why the Asgardians were worshiped). Odin has two beloved sons that he is training to take over as king some day; the impulsive warrior Thor (Chris Hemsworth) and the smooth talking Loki (Tom Hiddleston). Thor is a natural favorite of the people for his physical accomplishments, and the heir apparent; but his rashness triggers off an event that forces Odin to banish him to Earth and strip him of his powers.

Here is where the movie completely changes tone. Thor is found in the desert by a beautiful scientist (of course) named Jane Foster (Natalie Portman) and her colleague Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgard). Jane has been trying to chart outer space anomalies, and Thor just happens to be a walking example. He’s also trying get back his magical hammer Mjolnir, which Odin also tossed to Earth, but is now embedded in rock, and under the care of S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Coulson, last seen in the Iron Man movies.

The movie itself follows a relatively predictable script; Thor’s friends try to end his banishment, Loki schemes for power (or does he?), the Frost Giants plot their revenge, and Earth is placed in danger. But here is where the actors rise above the source material. Chris Hemsworth does an admirable job in the lead role, given its limits. He is good portraying both the arrogance that gets Thor in trouble to begin with, and the humility and “human” emotions he must cultivate in order to grow.

The choice of Anthony Hopkins had me a bit concerned at first, as I was remembering his over the top histrionics in the awful “Beowulf” and was anticipating more of the same based on the

trailers. But Hopkins is only as bombastic as he needs to be, and is able to use his talents to bring much needed depth to Odin, especially his love towards his sons. Hopkins' screen time may be limited, but he effectively uses every minute of it.

The true breakthrough performance in this film is Tom Hiddleston as Loki…who might be the most complex and interesting villain I've seen in a superhero movie since Harry Osborne (James Franco) in the third Spider-Man film. Loki has issues…no doubt about that; but it's not the standard villain's lust for power that drives him, but something altogether different. More than that I won't say, as it's something best for the viewers to discover on their own. Suffice to say; Hiddleston's performance elevates the entire film.

Natalie Portman and Stellan Skarsgard didn't get so lucky. There is nothing to complain about regarding their performances per se; it's just that their characters don't really have much to do other than react to the events surrounding them. Natalie only seems to be able to peer quizzically as she ponders a deep and difficult scientific problem, or else make doe-eyes and klutzy moves around Thor, whom she is obviously infatuated with. Meanwhile, Skarsgard's character is just there as the father figure for Jane.

While the story drags a bit most of the time they are on Earth, the story and effects soar whenever the superheroes are doing their superhero thing. The battle sequences are outstanding, and the visualization of the worlds of Asgard and of the Frost Giants is quite impressive.

This film is perfect for what it is attempting to do; generate interest in next year's "The Avengers", as I can say that I have a little higher expectation of the upcoming film than I had before. I was even willing to overlook an obvious tie-in scene that probably wasn't even shot until after the rest of the movie was completed; a scene with Jeremy Renner as a soldier ready to plug the then-mortal Thor with an arrow upon word from Agent Coulson. Yes; Renner has been recently announced as the actor to play Hawkeye the archer in "The Avengers", so they had to work an intro to him in somewhere.

My Rating – Frank Ryan (3 footballs)