

From Shakespeare to comic books: Kenneth Branagh directs Thor

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With the summer months approaching, Hollywood now enters its blockbuster movie season. Increasingly, a trip to the cinema feels like stepping onto an amusement park ride. Spectacle and bombast are the order of the day, and sequels abound, as the Hollywood studios return again and again to the safest and most lucrative wells from which to draw a profit. In some cases, we will be seeing films that mark the fourth or fifth entry into a single franchise.

Above all, this is the time when Hollywood's superheroes take flight. In addition to *Thor*, this season's first big comic book blockbuster, this summer is scheduled to bring films based on numerous popular comic book heroes, including the X-Men, Green Lantern, the Transformers, Captain America and Conan the Barbarian. We have noted before what a generally empty-headed trend this is.

There will be no convincing comic book fanatics, but one must say there has hardly been a film project based on a comic book yet that has resulted in a meaningful work. If *Thor* is any indication, there is no reason to believe there are any such works on the way.

In Asgard, the kingdom of the Norse gods, the mighty Thor (Chris Hemsworth) is about to be named King in a ceremony conducted by his father Odin (Anthony Hopkins). Before the ceremony is completed, agents of the Frost Giants, a race that had once threatened to conquer the Nine Realms of the universe until they were stopped by Odin's army, infiltrate Asgard in an attempt to steal back a vital power source confiscated by Odin during the wars.

Outraged by the invasion, Thor defies his father's wishes for peace and travels to the Frost Giants' world to fight them, threatening to start another large-scale war. For his arrogance and recklessness, Odin strips Thor of his powers and banishes him to Earth.

On Earth, Thor meets and befriends a team of scientists led by Jane Foster (Natalie Portman). Through his contact with Jane, Thor will learn the value of self-sacrifice and begin to reject his warrior mentality. In the meantime, Thor's jealous brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston) is revealed to be in league with the Frost Giants and is conspiring to claim the throne of Asgard for himself.

Once Thor proves himself humble and again worthy of his powers, having been changed by his time on Earth, he must reclaim Mjolnir, the magical hammer that is the source of his powers, and return to Asgard to battle Loki for the throne that is rightfully his.

In an already dubious film genre, *Thor* is surely among the silliest comic book films yet produced. It's virtually impossible to take any of this seriously. As the film progresses, one begins to feel a certain sympathy for the young actors tasked with making such material appear convincing. That they fail to do so is not entirely their fault. With regards to the more veteran actors—including Hopkins and Stellan Skarsgård—one only wants to ask them what on earth they're doing in this film.

In the director's chair is Kenneth Branagh, the actor and director best known for his adaptations of Shakespeare. In the past, Branagh has produced memorable film versions of *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Hamlet* (1996), works animated by a passion and confidence that Shakespeare should and *could* reach and enrich a mass audience. It is unfortunate that Branagh, perhaps given a limited choice in the matter by the film industry, has now devoted his time and energy to such an insubstantial work.

Without the richness of Shakespeare on which to base himself, and his own feeling for the material that comes

with it, Branagh's weaknesses as a director come to the fore, perhaps more than in any other of his films. His visual sensibility has never been his strength, and that continues to reveal itself here (although much of the film was created with computer animation). Branagh pursues the "drama" of *Thor* with the same self-consciousness that limits even his most interesting work. On the whole, *Thor* is taken far too seriously by Branagh and his collaborators, as though it *were* Shakespeare, and one tends to cringe as the actors, made up like futuristic Vikings, intone in deeply theatrical voices before galloping down the "Rainbow Bridge."

The "serious" undertone in this comic strip is war, and the consequences resulting from the actions of those who would too eagerly rush into it. But, as with all the other superhero films, in *Thor*, the world is filtered through, and reduced to, the primary colors of comic books. The entire film is so thin, one can almost see through it.

As thin as this work may be, there are currently plans underway to stretch it even thinner. There are already two sequels planned for the *Thor* franchise, and the character is scheduled to appear in at least three other films based on the Marvel Comics superhero team *The Avengers*. Chris Hemsworth has signed on to play Thor in each film.



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