

'The Avengers' is a Marvel to Behold

Arguably the most highly anticipated movie of the year with a reported staggering budget of \$220 million, *Marvel's The Avengers* finally hits theaters with lots of hype and hoopla—after two Iron Man films, two Hulk flicks with two different Hulks, plus Thor and Captain America movies.

So what can we say now that all those characters are together in one place in *The Avengers*? Believe the hype and hoopla!

The action starts as Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and his colleagues at . (Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate) are protecting and collecting the energy of the Tesseract. A holdover from the *Captain America* movie, the Tesseract is a small, glowing blue cube with an unlimited source of energy and the gateway to different portals in space.

Mysteriously, the Tesseract seems to have activated all by itself, but then they discover that it's under control of Loki (Tom Hiddleston)—the nefarious, fallen Asgardian demigod and brother of Thor—traveling through time and space to take over the world after making a deal with the leader of the Chitauri, an alien race seeking to conquer the galaxy.

"I am Loki of Asgard, burdened with glorious purpose," he pompously declares before trying to kill everyone in sight and utilizing his scepter to turn ace . archer Clint Barton/Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) and Professor Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgard) into his brainwashed minions. "The unspoken truth is that you yearn for subjugation, you are made to be ruled."

So the premise to assemble the iconic superheroes is set as Fury seeks to activate the Avengers Initiative. He sends Agent

Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) to India to recruit Dr. Bruce Banner/Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), while Agent Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg) approaches Tony Stark/ Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.), requesting that he review Dr. Selvig's research.

Fury himself approaches Steve Rogers/Captain America (Chris Evans) with an assignment to retrieve the Tesseract from Loki, who has hidden it somewhere on the planet. Meanwhile, Thor arrives on the scene in an attempt to try and talk sense into his brother to give up his plan to dominate the planet.

When you push a group of high achievers into a close and stressful situation and tell them to work together, you have two possible outcomes: complete failure or serendipitous success. So when Fury places a spy, a mild-mannered scientist, a self-described, brilliant playboy philanthropist, an honor-bound soldier and an otherworldly guardian of Earth in this crucible of pressure, sparks fly as they repeatedly fight each other—rather than Loki.

"We're not a team ... we're a time bomb," Dr. Banner muses in frustration. In Mark 23:5 Jesus warned that "if a house divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (NIV). And so, without common ground, this dysfunctional family thrown together by circumstance—distrustful of one another and often arrogant in their own powers—teeters on imploding.

The Avengers is far from a faith-based film, but it touches on many biblical principles and themes, including unity, revenge, pride, self-sacrifice, honor and obviously, good versus evil.

Writer-director Joss Whedon, whose gift for characterization and crackling dialogue is well-known to fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, deftly handles the ensemble cast with a great plot, plenty of character development, laugh-out-loud moments liberally scattered throughout, and surprising restraint in the violence and language.

The one-liners from nearly all the characters are a hoot, and

one even has a spiritual ring to it. When Loki claimed his right as a god, dressed in his ceremonial garments, Captain America scoffs and says, "Sorry, there's only one God, and I'm pretty sure He doesn't dress like that!" In another scene, Loki declares: "I have an army." To which, Tony Stark replies: "We have a Hulk."

Visually, *The Avengers* is a feast. The Hulk is more real than ever. His face looks exactly like a larger version of Ruffalo. The pace of *The Avengers* is like the best roller coaster you've ever been on: fast, then faster, breathtaking curves, loop after loop after loop, then even faster, some awesome air time, and then finally to a sudden, exhilarating halt. You get off, yearning to get back in line and do it again. What a fun movie even at two hours and 20 minutes!

And although watching the previous Iron Man, Hulk, Thor and Captain America films prepares you with information that adds another dimension to *The Avengers* backstory, Whedon's storytelling and dialogue prowess is adequate for even a Marvel neophyte to dive deeply into the plot and hang on for the ride.

With a 90-plus percent fresh rating on the review site Rotten Tomatoes, the movie will satisfy both the hardcore fans—the fanboys, the comic-book geeks—and non-comics aficionados. Perhaps the highest compliment for *The Avengers* is, it's not just a good superhero movie, but a good movie, period.

Content Watch: *Marvel's The Avengers* is rated PG-13 for intense sequences of sci-fi violence and action throughout, minor language and a mild drug reference. Although the violence is not as intense as *Thor* and there are no sexual innuendos like the two Iron Man films, the movie could still be scary for small children, so caution is advised.