

By Thomas Doherty

"Evolution leaps forward," intones Professor X (Patrick Stewart) amid a title sequence swirling with double helixes and genetic codes. As things later evolve, he is right on the money. After decades of stunted gestation, a Marvel Comic has finally come to the screen with the wit, wonder, and energy of the page-turning original. X-MEN not only survives the new environment but thrives as a fit species of biotech-flavored SF and, doubtless, the virile progenitor of a race of profitable sequels.

Conceived in an age in which gene splicing and genome mapping were not even fantasies, X-MEN seemed all too credible and topical in summer 2000: two rival bands of mutant humans, genetically altered by either natural evolution or medical intervention, do battle for supremacy at the top of the food chain, spicing up the human gene pool with supernatural appendages and mind over matter abilities.

About time, too. It is remarkable that the wondrous universe spun by the prolific Stan Lee at Marvel Comics in the mid-1960s has never before come to cinematic life with the galvanizing excitement engendered by the classic comic books. For a generation of youngsters on the cusp of puberty, Lee's off-kilter sensibility and seductive off-world mythos offered a magical deliverance from the pallid panels of Disney and DC. Back before Lee and his crew of gifted illustrators reinvented the moribund format, Superman, Batman, and the Justice League of America—whitebread stiffs all—strutted through plotlines as bland as the pen and ink illustrations that chronicled their exploits. (Remember this was after the Comics Code Authority had put the quietus on the juvenile delinquency-inducing gore of EC Comics and before Frank Miller had given Batman a facelift in *The Dark Knight*—and well before the term "graphic novel" was coined.)

Realizing that he really wasn't going to write the great American novel, that comics were hack work only if hacks worked on them, Lee decided to bring some of the pleasures of art and literature to the lowbrow genre: introspective; complex characters, intricate (sometimes ludicrously intricate) plotting, and lush, phantasmagorical artwork, usually from the quirky quills of Jack Kirby or Steve Ditko. For Lee's heroes, the supernatural prowess bestowed by a radioactive spider or lab experiment gone bad were as much psychic burdens as physical gifts. A talent for web-crawling didn't make getting a prom date any easier. Soon, the Marvel and DC rivalry was as overmatched as the Beatles and the Dave Clark Five.

Yet in the decades that followed, even as Su-

# X-MEN

## MARVEL COMICS MASTERPIECE

*At last, a movie with all the wit, wonder and energy of the original.*



Hugh Jackman as Wolverine, in a star-making debut and Rebecca-Romijn-Stamos as Mystique, fulsomely showcasing her Marvel-ous proportions.

perman and Batman spawned lucrative motion picture franchises, Marvel Comics' efforts at cross media synergy were more miss than hit: the likeable TV series *THE INCREDIBLE HULK*, the rather dull *BLADE* (1998), and a limp cartoon version of *SPIDER-MAN*.

X-MEN, however, is exquisite. Under the expert helming of Bryan Singer, director of the overrated *USUAL SUSPECTS* and the underrated *APT PUPIL*, the film retains that seductive mesh of loopy fantasy and faux realism that defines the comic book milieu—where the earth as we know it looks familiar even but certain people just happen to defy the laws of physics and biology.

For X-MEN experts, the backstory is familiar enough, but the striking opening will surprise even the cognoscenti. Set in Poland in 1944, the sequence evokes the mise en scene of *SCHINDLER'S LIST* more than the panels of Marvel Comics: a tormented parade of yellow-starred Jews and tattooed camp workers is forced-marched into a Nazi death camp. A young Jewish boy witnesses his family pass through the gates, a trauma that leaves him, a protean mutant, with an abiding hatred of all mankind.

The X-MEN line-up is so vibrantly sketched

that even a Marvel Comics virgin will be able to keep up. Not that the characters exactly blend into the furniture (well, one of them can). The alpha male among the X-MEN is the hunky Wolverine (Hugh Jackman, in a star-making performance), defined by his stainless steel claws, recuperative powers, and surly manner. A reluctant recruit to the ranks of X-dom, we know within his lupine heart beats a sentimental puppy because of his big brotherly bond with the troubled teen mutant Rogue (Anna Paquin).

Lending the film a subtext of seriousness, or pretentiousness is the Xenophobic raving of the McCarthyite Senator Kelly (Bruce Davidson), who seeks to pass a proposed Mutant Registration Act, a kind of Nuremberg Law targeting the chromosomically challenged. The political allegory is somewhat dreary and overwrought; the film noticeably picks up steam when the senator is liquidated from the proceedings. As Rogue knows, the X-men subtext is less about political oppression than sexual awakening: the mutations, Dr. Jane Gray explains meaningfully, first manifest themselves at puberty.

X-MEN keeps intact the wicked witticisms and howling hyperbole of the comic books: the knowing irony (the Hitchcockian finale after the Statue of Liberty), the outlandish attire ("you actually go out in this things?" says Wolverine when he spies the official X-men uniform) and the cornball comic balloon dialogue ("you homo sapiens and your guns!" sneers Magneto). For the boys, the Marvel-ous proportions of the X-babes are fulsomely showcased, especially Stamos, spray-painted into an spangled blue outfit, a Jack Kirby pin-up come to life.

Of course, X-MEN suffers from the usual problem with comic book characters: they never die. But such quibbles are extraneous. A summer movie that is fun but not moronic, fantastic in vision but grounded in real emotions, vivid characters, and timely issues, the comic book-derived X-MEN is smarter than *MI-2* and more believable than *GONE IN 60 SECONDS*. It is true to its comic book mentality, which in the case of Stan Lee and Marvel Comics is high praise. □

