

Outsized 'Hancock' flies high in action, laughs

Contributed by Tim Riley
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HANCOCK (Rated PG-13)

You can't go wrong with Will Smith, no matter what role he is playing. To say the least, 'Hancock' takes one of our favorite actors in a totally new and unpredictable direction.

Believe it or not, in the film's titular role, Will Smith's John Hancock is a very different type of superhero. Disgruntled, sarcastic and misunderstood, Hancock is a homeless alcoholic who just happens to possess superhuman powers, much like Superman or Batman but without the nifty costume. Unlike other superheroes, he doesn't live in a mansion with an underground lair. Normally passed-out drunk, Hancock resides on the most readily available bus bench.

Well-intentioned but careless, Hancock has a nasty habit of wreaking extensive damage while performing a daring rescue. Though his heroics can be appreciated, his antics and mishaps are starting to grate on the citizens of Los Angeles. It doesn't help much that he looks as disheveled and unkempt as any hobo shuffling along Skid Row.

When people think of superheroes, they want someone in a crisp, appealing uniform, something polished like the Batsuit or Superman's tights. In a city full of publicists, Hancock is desperately in need of an image makeover. Then he rescues hapless Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman), a public relations executive struggling to make a successful firm.

Stuck in his car on railroad tracks while a train quickly approaches, Ray is saved at the last minute by the heroic Hancock. Again, Hancock causes considerable damage by derailing the train, among other things. Of course, Ray appreciates his savior and seizes upon the opportunity to offer Hancock a way to burnish his image. To show his gratitude, Ray invites Hancock to dinner at his house with his wife Mary (Charlize Theron) and their young son Aaron (Jae Head).

The rehabilitation of Hancock into a more acceptable and decent superhero requires the development of an interesting PR plan. The first thing is a rather basic effort at sobriety and handling anger management. Ray also convinces Hancock that he should serve a brief prison stint to pay back society for some misdeeds.

Of course, there are some troubling developments behind the prison walls when other inmates seek retribution. The other side of the coin is that Hancock's incarceration keeps him unavailable for his heroics, and soon his services are in demand once again as the city explodes in crime waves, though now his desire to be more courteous and understanding also results in some unintended problems.

The story of 'Hancock' cruises along with much fun generated by the superhero's sarcastic quips, as well as by his maladroitness attempts to do good. There's plenty of action, violence and destruction of property, mostly courtesy of Hancock's exceedingly erratic and reckless behavior.

But the genial goofiness of 'Hancock' soon gives way to a more abrupt shift in direction and tone. This is the result of a major revelation that is less surprising upon reflection of some of the attitudes on display earlier in the story. Nevertheless, the surprise should not be revealed because it sets up the climactic confrontation.

'Hancock' is the kind of film likely to generate divided opinions. Again, Will Smith can hardly do any wrong, and here his anti-hero is an engaging character well worth rooting for, even in a subdued fashion. And yet, paradoxically, Hancock is not a lovable figure. Still, he entertains because his attitude is devil-may-care.

As a film, 'Hancock' suffers from its disjointed construction, but this is not a critical failure. As I see it, 'Hancock' is far more interesting than the cartoon-like qualities often found in this type of film.

If you like Will Smith and trust his instincts, then 'Hancock' is definitely worth a look. Moreover, he's supported very ably by Jason Bateman's enthusiasm and Charlize Theron's understated mystery.

DVD RELEASE UPDATE

You can get a double dose of William Conrad in his successful TV career as a plump district attorney or an overweight private investigator. Conrad cast a large shadow in 'Cannon' and 'Jake and the Fatman.' Both series are being released on DVD.

As the private eye Frank Cannon, Conrad employed his physical attributes to larger-than-life effect while enjoying five-star meals and fighting for justice. 'Cannon: Season One, Volume One' found that Cannon's girth didn't allow for many intense fist fights, but the series substituted high-speed car chases in their place.

In a smart crime drama from the late 1980s, Conrad starred as the tough district attorney Jason 'Fatman' McCabe, working alongside his happy-go-lucky younger partner Jake Styles (Joe Penny).

'Jake and the Fatman: Season One, Volume One' follows the DA and his slick investigator sidekick as the unlikely duo set out to solve the toughest cases.

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