

Review of Doctor Strange

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By creating that last post, I think I sort of committed myself to reviewing the Doctor Strange movie once it arrived. Now it has—so here we go.

The Doctor Strange character started out more or less fully formed in its first comic book story in Strange Tales in 1963, and we learned of the sorcerer's origin only a few issues later. Maybe such a start *in medias res* could have worked for the movies, maybe not. It would certainly have been something more original than what we got, which is a story that begins somewhat before the beginning and ends just when Stephen Strange has donned the cloak of Sorcerer Supreme and stands ready for the real adventure to commence. This is in the nature of origin stories, and the reason why they can often feel a bit frustrating, I think.

In fact, I found the first quarter of the film to be the weakest, with quite a lot happening on the screen, but not so much with the story.

When things take off, however, they *really* do. Kevin Feige said in a promotional short that they "didn't hold back." He spake Truth.

That said, there is nothing really wrong with the beginning of the tale of Stephen Strange, star surgeon and Douchebag Supreme, either. The writers don't have that pitch-perfect sense for melodrama and comic relief that Joss Whedon has displayed in the Avengers movies (few do), but they don't mistreat the characters or offend against the logic of their motivations, and that goes far indeed to keep me pleased. (This, by the way, is a standard I think we have come to ex-



pect of the MCU movies by now, and a reason they keep getting such good marks overall. Maybe it's Disney—they always had a very keen eye for storytelling—or maybe it's Kevin Feige not letting any nonsense past him. Either way, I'm certainly grateful for the consequent quality bump in superhero movies.)

Cumberbatch and the rest of the cast appear to be enjoying themselves, and don't waver when the time comes for the big gestures—and given the psychedelic typhoon of special effects they are constantly competing with (protip: see this one in 3D), it really was required. Tilda Swinton in particular has an almost supernatural presence, and doesn't seem to hate being a timeless mystical sage one bit. Chiwetel Ejiofor and Mads Mikkelsen deliver their material with perfectly sufficient conviction, as does Rachel McAdams in her smaller and less outré part.

Even so, this is one film where the world—the multiverse of alternate dimensions and arcane forces, to be precise—takes center stage. It's in keeping with the Doctor Strange canon. No story ever benefitted from putting its focus somewhere other than on its characters, however, and it is true here as well—but few movies make up for it in a fashion anywhere close to this! The kaleidoscopic lunacy unleashed on the audience, and on an unsuspecting Stephen Strange, is surprisingly effective in making its point: however smart you feel on the streets in your home city—in *this* world, you don't have a clue. (And you'll have to swallow whatever New Age mumbo jumbo comes with it.)



I don't need a film to be a 9 out of 10 to make me happy, and Doctor Strange gets 7 robust Rings of Raggadorr from me. The characters were treated with respect and given a few nice twists—and the world of sorcery was something to

behold. The climax was satisfyingly brainy rather than brawny, as in any characteristic Doc Strange story—even if it maybe didn't make absolutely flawless sense. (This, too, is tradition.)

As satisfied as I am with what we got, I still can't quite liberate myself from thoughts about what might have been—considering that, years ago, this film was to be directed by Guillermo del Toro (*Hellboy I and II*, *Pan's Labyrinth*) from a script by Alex Proyas (*Dark City*). I think this would have meant less of the Inception aesthetic, and more of the H.P. Lovecraft tone, that has periodically existed in the comic. (See: Shuma-Gorath.) I would have enjoyed that.

As for consistency with canon, I don't worry about it too much. There were no disturbing deviations, and most of them were either introduced in recent comics, absolutely necessary (Wong), or just good ideas (Mordo). I enjoyed seeing the Wand of Watoomb, but thought it seemed a bit underpowered here as compared to the comic, got curious about "the scepter of the Living Tribunal," and was amused to learn that the Eye of Agamotto does not reveal Truth in this version—for reasons of the long MCU arc, etc. (I tell you, at this point, *Avengers: Infinity War* better deliver. . .)

Sit through both post-credit scenes for hints on the continuing saga of the Sorcerer Supreme. Doctor Strange, no doubt, will remain a whisper in the shadows until his return on the big screen.

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