

A Fly in the Ointment

Spider-Man leaps to the dark side

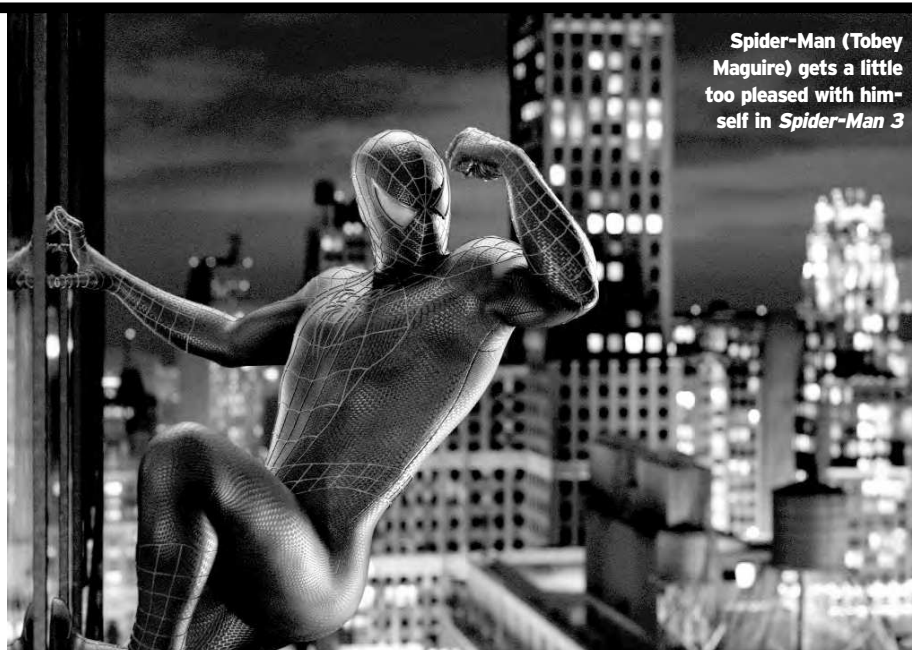
SPIDER-MAN 3: Directed by Sam Raimi. Written by Sam Raimi, Ivan Raimi and Alvin Sargent. Cinematography, Bill Pope. Music, Christopher Young. Starring Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Thomas Haden Church and Topher Grace. Columbia Pictures, 2007. PG-13. 140 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Like a byproduct of global warming, the Hollywood summer season heats up earlier every year. Huge films blaze into our local multiplexes, their coronas bursting with fiery explosions and special effects. You can hardly shield your eyes from the radiance. But look too long or too hard, and you'll notice something: Inside that aura is a big gassy mess. *Spider-Man 3*, this summer's first true blockbuster, is sizzling hot right now, but it's about as much fun as a third-degree sunburn. It's the *Revenge of the Sith* of the *Spider-Man* franchise, a great shadow along a once-bright street. To say it fizzles doesn't quite drive the point home: It may be the worst film any of its stars have ever made.

Not that prior to the third installment, the *Spider-Man* movies were the *Godfather* of summer action flicks. But they were serviceable, even likeable at times, mostly due to the casting of Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst and a well-chosen cadre of memorable Spidey villains. Who can forget Alfred Molina as the tentacled Doc Ock threatening to "peel the flesh" from Mary Jane's bones or Willem Dafoe as the über-

villain Green Goblin? (Dafoe, a gifted but seldom-seen actor, has the face of a recently dead corpse, which may explain why he's reported to have more onscreen deaths than any other mainstream actor.) But the real secret to the *Spider-Man* films was the involvement of first-rate screenwriters, including novelist Michael Chabon for 2004's *Spider-Man 2*. This time around, things are a little different: Director Sam Raimi is the head screenwriter, with some assistance from his big brother Ivan.

The result is a film that, if it were soup, would resemble a bile-raising broth of every ingredient found in the kitchen. If it were shampoo, it would be Clairol's "Touch of Yoghurt." In other words, *Spider-Man 3* is too much. In this installment, Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) battles no fewer than four villains, not including the one that threatens him the most: his inflated sense of his own importance. This time around, fame has gotten to Spider-Man's head, as has Sandman (Thomas Haden Church), Venom (Topher Grace), Goblin Jr. (James Franco) and a curious black substance secreted from a meteorite that has more personality than all the others put together, even if it's a blatant rip-off of the "black oil" from *The X-Files*. (Or is it the other way around?) At the same time, Mary Jane is trying to create an identity of



Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) gets a little too pleased with himself in *Spider-Man 3*

her own by singing in a Broadway musical. You know, just branching out a little.

Part video game and part comic strip, *Spider-Man 3* spins aimlessly in lazy-susan mode; when one villain goes down for the count, another shows up to cause trouble. The black goo, dormant for most of the film, makes its move about 90 minutes into the movie, but its attack on Spidey is one of the great squandered moments in recent blockbuster memory. Still, the oil transforms our boy arachnid. He starts wearing eyeliner and parting his hair differently, which is about as much inner conflict as Peter Parker can express. What follows is the one courageous sequence in *Spider-Man 3*, at least until you realize its implica-

tions: Around the time Spider-Man turns black (his suit, actually), Parker struts down the street to a soul-music track as women fawn all over him. It's not meant to be offensive; Maguire is more Bright Eyes than Billy Dee Williams, and it's a rare moment of humor in which the perpetually stifled Parker seems loose and comfortable in his skin. But the racial undertones are unmistakable.

At about this time, a theatergoer next to me lowered his head into his hands. Take heart, I wanted to tell him. This too shall pass. Maguire and Dunst have both declined *Spider-Man 4*, proving that youth and wisdom aren't as incompatible as we thought. **EW**

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