

Review: 'Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings'

By Michael Phillips
Chicago Tribune

Opening this week exclusively in theaters — for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health — “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings” really is enough to make Year 2 pandemic action fans mask up, wipe down and socially distance indoors for a couple of hours. If that’s in your personal risk zone, you’ll be rewarded with a sharp, full-bodied addition to the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Director/co-writer Destin Daniel Cretton’s film accomplishes something akin to what “Black Panther” accomplished in better times. It broadens the scope of superhero representation and storytelling. It offers an adversary, and a father figure, of teasing ambiguity and complicated rooting interests. Tony Leung plays him, which is excellent news right there.

“Shang-Chi” also boasts two high-velocity action sequences in its first half that basically seal the deal. The first, set in San Fran-



jasin boland/marvel studios/TNS
Simu Liu stars as Shang-Chi in the Marvel Studios film “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings.”

cisco, hurls “Speed” headlong into Jackie Chan territory, taking place on a careening city bus whose riders include several well-trained assassins out to get our hero, hotel valet Shaun, who is actually Shang-Chi of the title. He’s played by Simu Liu, who’s both engagingly boyish and, when required, the prototypical muscled-up MCU man-toy.

The second, maniacally kinetic martial-arts melee, even more indebted to Jackie Chan’s wondrous legacy, goes up, down and sideways all over construction

scaffolding high above the streets of Macao. Though this latest Marvel Studios project features a half-ton of digital effects work, it’s more elegant and less headache-y than the usual Marvel Cinematic Universe movie. First-rate stunt coordination and execution trumps blue and gold swirlies dished out by an array of special effects houses anytime.

I’ll make this next bit as quick as possible. Wenwu (Leung) is a warrior whose dominance is made possible, in part, by the titular 10-ring weaponry/accessory line. He falls for the matriarch of the magical Ta Lo kingdom (Fala Chen), and eases into family life with two children: Xialing (Meng'er Zhang) and Shang-Chi.

The lyric interlude does not last. Screenwriters Dave Calaham, Andrew Lanham and co-writer/director Cretton send Shang-Chi into adolescent training as an assassin, followed by his escape from all that family drama and political hoo-ha. He scoots to America. Best friend and fellow hotel valet Katy doesn’t know his

real story. The rest of “Shang-Chi” reveals that story, slipping back and forth geographically and into the mists of the mystical past. Awkwafina is a huge asset as Katy. Who else in modern movies can hot-foot a scene’s pacing so effortlessly, playing it for laughs and for keeps in the same beat?

The cast also includes the grand Michelle Yeoh, and some welcome turns from folks interpolated into this movie because this movie has a contractual obligation to link back to the previous MCU movies. Benedict Wong: check. Ben Kingsley? Check?!? That’s right! Ben Kingsley, whose provincial ham actor character, hired to play The Mandarin and periodically bail out “Iron Man 3,” returns for this movie, and the notion works. Most everything in “Shang-Chi” works, though I found some of the second-half preoccupations and

battle sequences more routine than the first-half highlights.

The Shang-Chi character was born in the early 1970s, at the time of the ABC-TV series “Kung Fu” and Bruce Lee’s “Enter the Dragon”-era successes. In early iterations of Shang-Chi’s comic book adventures, he was the son of the early 20th century “yellow peril” scourge, Fu Manchu. That racially toxic literary and cinematic stain is nowhere to be found in this film, and his replacement — portrayed by Leung with equal parts grace and cold steel — make “Shang-Chi’s” familial concerns hang together and mean something.

I fear for the sequel, as I do for all Marvel sequels, because so often they’re about delivering another round of the expected. But “Shang-Chi” may succeed there, too. It certainly succeeds here.

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