

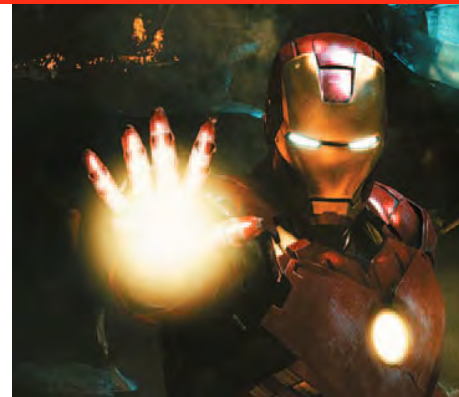
Summer Movie Preview 2010



BLACK WIDOW Scarlett Johansson



PEPPER POTTS Gwyneth Paltrow



IRON MAN Robert Downey Jr.

The Kraken has been released. The Dragon has been trained. Ass has been kicked. And now the summer movie season can begin. Right?

Hollywood hopes so. After all, an industry can only stay flush with *Avatar* cash for so long. And while it's extremely unlikely any film will repeat — or come close to repeating — the global bonanza of James Cameron's science-fiction epic, there are dozens of films that will attempt to try. Most of which, it should be added, are aimed at your average suburban teenager.

So for the next three months, brace yourself for superheroes (*Iron Man 2*), sequels (*Toy Story 3*, *Shrek Forever After*, *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse*), broad comedies (*Grown Ups*), family films (*Marmaduke*), remakes (*Robin Hood*) and 3D (*The Last Airbender*) at multiplexes everywhere.

On a promising note, the year's most remarkable success story so far has been *How to Train Your Dragon*, which has managed to show uncommon resilience from weekend to weekend — not because of gimmicks, advertising or hype, but because of simple, dependable word of mouth. Any of this summer's releases should be so lucky.

— Kevin Williamson

"I think I'm a pretty smart guy. What I am smart about is that I've been in so many movies that sucked ... (I'm) an expert in the field of how not to make a bad movie."

Robert Downey Jr.



GUS RUELAS/REUTERS

There's intense pressure for *Iron Man 2* to live up to original, but Robert Downey Jr. cool, collected as ever



LOS ANGELES — Whether you're saving the world or just your career, flying under the radar has its advantages. For one thing, no one's gunning for you. And if you crash and burn, who's going to notice?

Which more or less describes what it was like two years ago for Robert Downey Jr. and Jon Favreau, the improbable star and unlikely director of 2008's *Iron Man*, a comic-book adaptation many in Hollywood doubted would achieve lift-off.

"We had nothing to lose," Favreau says now.

Downey, you may recall, was better known for his troubled past than for headlining massive film franchises. Favreau was coming off the financial dud *Zathura*. The studio, Marvel Entertainment, was untested. And did anyone know what *Iron Man* was, anyway? "There's a lot of crap in that genre, so the bar isn't that high," Favreau says. "There was definitely the sense of 'We have to do something special here' because I had really laid it on the line to get (Downey) in and he really laid it on the line to get the part ... We thought if we did something special we could really impress people."

Mission accomplished. Witty, slick and thrilling, *Iron Man*, starring Downey as military industrialist-turned-armoured crusader Tony Stark,



WHIPLASH Mickey Rourke



NICK FURY Samuel L. Jackson



WAR MACHINE Don Cheadle

IRON WILL

grossed \$585 million worldwide, dazzling fans and critics alike. It put Favreau back on the A-list. And it propelled Downey — in an epic comeback for someone whose substance-abuse problems saw him fired from TV's *Ally McBeal* in 2001 — into the industry's top-tier of bankable actors.

"He was as done as you get," Favreau says of his leading man. "Now he's as big as you get."

The only downside? Having to follow it with a sequel. Anticipation, understandably, isn't just high — it's orbital. And anything short of record-shattering this time may be viewed as a disappointment. Already some box-office prognosticators have suggested *Iron Man 2*, which kicks off the summer movie season on Friday, could topple *The Dark Knight's* \$155 million opening weekend.

The new film picks up six months after Stark's revelation that "I am Iron Man." If only he had kept his motor-mouth shut. Now a global peace-keeper as well as a billionaire-celebrity, he's also the target of multiple, sinister forces. The U.S. government, for instance, wants Stark to surrender his technology, while wormy rival arms manufacturer Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell) is scheming to topple his empire. Most menacing of all, though, is Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke), a Russian genius whose family had secretive connections to Stark's inventor father Howard (*Mad Men's* John Slattery, seen in flashbacks). Out for revenge, Vanko constructs his own pseudo-suit of armour — outfitted with two

crackling energy whips capable of neutralizing Stark's weaponry.

Meanwhile, returning characters Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) and James "Rhodey" Rhodes (Don Cheadle, replacing Terrence Howard) are joined by new addition Natalie (Scarlett Johansson), a Stark Industries personal assistant who's secretly the Black Widow, a catsuit-clad agent of SHIELD, the clandestine agency headed by Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson). Sound crowded? It's a bigger cast, apparently, to meet those loftier expectations (and expand the existing cinematic Marvel universe).

Not that you would guess Downey feels much pressure from the way he effortlessly holds court. In a packed news conference at a Beverly Hills hotel, he is all "unchecked hubris" — his words, not ours.

Among the quippy highlights? Asked if he ever dressed up as a superhero as a kid, he answers, "Growing up, no. But in my mid-30s in Palm Springs, right before an arrest, yes."

When the topic of Favreau's escalating weight — the director has a supporting role as Stark's bodyguard — arises, the star says, "By the time we were doing reshoots, they were framing him out of shots."

And lastly, about kissing Gwyneth Paltrow, he confides, "Despite what she said on set, she still thinks about it."

Throughout, Downey shows he can work a room as effectively as Stark can operate tech.

"I think we just laboured really hard and said, 'Okay, we're audience

members who made the first *Iron Man* successful and we're smart, which is why we were drawn to it, so what do we expect?" Downey says. "We kept putting ourselves in the audience's seat. For me, the mental and emotional aspects of development of Tony were a lot more — it's strange to say — personal because it's not related to my life so to speak, but just in that saying you're something and being something are entirely different. Also, this whole idea of Howard Stark, and the legacy and the shadow of that legacy that Mickey and I were always talking about being two sides of the same coin ... Really, all of the characters — including Black Widow — bring me back to an extended family that I've always had ... Rhodey is there saying, 'Hey, you've always had me on your wing, so why won't you really let me help you?' Obviously, the Pepper thing is really about love."

Later in a roundtable interview with a smaller group of journalists, Downey, who has a 16-year-old son from his first marriage, is more circumspect, describing himself as a "husband and dad" who has settled into middle age.

"Truth be told, as you know, I'm in a great spot and I'm in the spot I used to bitch to my agents, 'Why are you not in this spot?' It's just a really nice time right now. I'm 45. I'm in a really good spot career-wise. I've got a nice thing going on. I've got the missus," he says, referring to Susan Downey, his second wife and a veteran film producer who has worked on *Sherlock Holmes* and *Iron Man 2*.

Of course, one of the qualities

that elevated the original *Iron Man* was the alchemy between actor and alter-ego. Stark — the cool, sarcastic, lightning-quick playboy — seemed uncannily tailored to Downey's own public persona.

When one journalist describes him as "the thinking man's superhero" Downey responds, "Any thinking at all makes you the thinking man's superhero."

But he concedes that by the nature of Stark's origin, the character is more seasoned and complicated than most costumed crime-fighters.

"It's not a coming-of-age story. He was already of age and needed to be corrected. It's a much more adult framework for development."

Likewise, as Downey observes, he's hardly a newcomer himself.

"I think I'm a pretty smart guy. What I am smart about is that I've been in so many movies that sucked," he says, calling himself "an expert in the field of how not to make a bad movie."

"I wouldn't wish it on my greatest adversary to walk through all the misfires I have had to glean this special gift ..."

"To quote Robert Duvall to Sean Penn's character in *Colors*, under the direction of Dennis Hopper, 'Yeah, let's just walk down the hill and f--- 'em all.' That's kind of my thing right now. I'm not a kid anymore. I feel my age. I feel my limits as much as I feel my opportunities. It's had a very grounding effect on me."

"No matter how someone looks for their age, they're still that age. So in 1965, the clock started ticking. So now when I go

around a corner, the hubcap flies off, you know what I mean?"

Not exactly what you expect to hear from one of Hollywood's new-model action heroes.

"There's an irony that I have this perception now, when in reality, I'm kind of beat-up. I'm a very well-preserved middle-aged guy."

Presumably, there's less physicality in his next outing — November's road trip comedy *Due Date*, directed by Todd Phillips (*The Hangover*) — but that's not to suggest he doesn't have several more years of fights, chases and explosions ahead of him. In October, he shoots *Sherlock Holmes 2*, followed by *The Avengers*, which teams up Iron Man, Captain America, Thor and the Hulk. After that, *Iron Man 3* appears inevitable. The only way he's going to disappear from the spotlight anytime soon is when he wants to.

"Sometimes I like travelling anonymously and I can still do that," he reveals.

How is that possible for one of the world's most recognizable movie stars?

"I just do. I get myself in the mindset. I'm not going to make a big stink and look like some guy who's pretending he's not a film actor who doesn't want to react to you reacting. I'm fortunate too because I've had two or three or seven different lives."

Enough lives to know there's always another if his current heavy-metal heat sputters out. "It's the career of an actor. It's not a big deal. It's just so not a big deal."

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