

Review: Alita Battle Angel

Cyborgs, and bounty hunters, and Motorball, oh my!

“Alita: Battle Angel” has been 16 years in the making. Writer and producer James Cameron announced the film in 2003, but production was delayed due to Cameron’s work on “Avatar.” In 2016, Robert Rodriguez came on as director to adapt the 1990s Japanese manga series by Yukito Kishiro.

The cyberpunk action film is set in the year 2563, 300 years after a war that devastated Earth. “The Fall” has decimated all but one of Earth’s floating cities. Zalem sits above the rest, living a life of luxury feeding off the resources from Iron City and leaving everyone below to fight for their left-over scraps.

In one of the Iron City junk yards, the altruistic cybernetics genius Dr. Dyson Ido (Christoph Waltz) discovers the core remains of a cyborg; her human brain still alive. He fits her with a new mechanical body and names her Alita. Alita (Rosa Salazar) wakes up with no memory of who she was before and no knowledge of the world she is in now. Ido raises her as his own daughter, protecting her from the dangers of the city and the truth about her past.

With the help of her friend Hugo (Keanu Reeves), the local “cute criminal with a heart of gold,” Alita learns about the city, the game of Motorball and about her own identity. As Alita discovers more about her past and her warrior combat skills through triggered flashbacks, she becomes a powerful threat to the corrupt dealing of Motorball league owner Vector (Mahershala Ali) and Chiren (Jennifer Connelly), putting herself and her loved ones in danger.

Much like the city of Zalem, the film’s stunning visuals cannot hide the messy narrative lingering below. The movie looks great: it has beautiful CGI work, fantastic world building and an all-star cast of Academy Award winners. However, everything else falls flat, like the crumbling Iron City.

The film packs a lot of action and tangential plots into two hours. It does too much and not enough. The conflicts pile on top of one another and none of them are really fleshed out. The dialogue feels inorganic and superficial, filled with spoon fed exposition and eye-roll-inducing clichés.

The film has also received much criticism for its white-washed adaptation of the Japanese manga series. The lack of Asian actors in the film was shockingly apparent and a major disappointment, especially after a year of increased representation in film. Academy-Award winning films like “Black Panther” and “Into the Spider-Verse” were successful because they demonstrated how much representation matters. It captivates and inspires audiences and enhances the narrative by providing added authenticity and nuanced story-telling.

Even “Crazy Rich Asians” was a box office and critical hit, proving not only that there is an abundance of talented Asian actors, but that audiences will show up for Asian-led films.

However much of a mess the movie was, Alita herself was a strong character who shines on screen. Alita beautifully captures everything teenage girls are, and what they wish they could be. She is an outsider; a cyborg among humans with no memory of her past life living in a world of which she is unfamiliar. Despite this, Alita is determined to write her own future and find her place in the world. She is an angsty badass who can take on anyone or anything that dares to hold her back from her goals or threaten her loved ones.

She might be a cyborg, but Alita is going through all the emotions of a real teenage human. She is passionate and headstrong, leading to fights with her protective father and a Romeo-and-Juliet-style romance with the first bad-boy to sweep her away on his motorcycle.

While she struggles to understand her emotions, she is able to take out her frustration in kick-ass action sequences, putting her teenage girl rage to good use fighting evil. Most of us just slammed our bedroom door or dyed our hair when we were feeling frustrated or rebellious.

Alita proves that teenage girls are not to be underestimated, something the bad guys (and gals) of the film learn the hard way. It was not only fun, but empowering to see Alita, a

teenage girl (albeit one with robot limbs and high-level combat training) on screen being a strong heroine of her own story. That is what I am choosing to take away from this film.

The film ends in true blockbuster action movie fashion: geared up for a sequel. The film was made with a second movie in mind, which explains the big names in the cast whose appearances were brief yet seemingly important. The final sequence suggests that the mess of a plot in this film was leading up to a bigger story after all. Hopefully the script for part two will find a more clear focus while continue to allow Alita to grow into the strong, dynamic female warrior she is destined to be.