Catching Fire: let the games begin (again)

January 2nd, 2014

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire 2013 movie poster. The “75th Quarter Quell” is going to be even more twisted than the first games. (Photo fair use)

434 days.
Possibly the most painful 434 days of my life.

It was exactly this many days between the release of The Hunger Games and accompanying sequel Catching Fire.

The wait was worth it.

I settled into my seat, proudly held my decoy Mockingjay pin in my clammy hands and practically suffocated from excitement when the first scene emerged. For 146 minutes, I hardly touched my popcorn, and subconsciously chewed away all my nails. That was the only way I could silently release my anxiety and euphoric joy.

It is also the most satisfied I have been walking out of the theater in a long time.

Catching Fire is the second movie in the trilogy based off the award-winning books written by Suzanne Collins.

The film series went through an unexpected change; Hunger Games director, Gary Ross, stepped down for future films of the trilogy. Ross said in a recent press release he just simply did not have the time and needed
“to write and prep the movie I would have wanted to make because of the fixed and tight production schedule.”

Last year, he was officially replaced by Francis Lawrence. Lawrence is a highly acclaimed director, who is best known for his work on movies such as I Am Legend (2007) and Water for Elephants (2011). He also directed Lady Gaga’s music video for her chart-topping song “Bad Romance” and Beyoncé’s “Run the World.”

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire broke all kinds of records opening weekend. The official box office report announced the movie had a $161.1 million debut. Only three films have opened higher than Catching Fire: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2, Iron Man 3, and The Avengers. The best November debut before Catching Fire was Twilight: New Moon, which raked in $142.9 million in 2009, but it was still no match for the stellar Hunger Games sequel.

The Hunger Games ended with the powerful duo, Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) and Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), arriving home after winning the 74th Hunger Games and ultimately beating the Capitol at their own sick game. The last scene showed President Snow walking away with vengeance for the two in his eyes.

434 days later, the plot continues with the release of Catching Fire.

The first chunk of the movie consisted of Katniss and Peeta, the winners of the Hunger Games, touring through the twelve districts for the Victory Tour. The events witnessed in each district and seen on the monitors lead Katniss to believe an uprising is beginning. Her assumptions prove right.

Snow visits Katniss prior to the Victory Tour, threatening her family and friends if she does not continue to act as if she is in love with Peeta in order to distract the other districts and prevent a rebellion.

Eventually, Snow recognizes Katniss is the face of rebellion in the districts, as well as the other winners of past Hunger Games. He decides they must be eliminated.

Every 25 Games there is a Quarter Quell, a drastic twist in the Games. Last Quell was double the tributes put in the arena. The first Quell, the districts were required to pick the tributes themselves.

And this Quarter Quell?

“The tributes shall be reaped from the existing pool of victors.”

Katniss and Peeta prepare in the Capitol and fight in a second Games. It would have been interesting to see more in the arena, but it was comparable to the book. While Katniss is prepared to die so Peeta lives, Haymitch (Woody Harrelson) and others are hoping for a full-on revolution.

For an audience member who does not have a prior knowledge of the books, the end was a flawless cliffhanger. It was one of the most well played-out cliffhangers I have seen. It was clever, satisfying, and a genius move on the director’s part.

Jennifer Lawrence has once again proven to be one of the best in the industry. Katniss is such a dynamic role and after the last movie, Lawrence had a lot to prove. Did she rise to the occasion?

Absolutely.
This love-struck, powerhouse duo thought they were safe from entering a Hunger Game’s arena again. But, the Capitol has a few surprises up their sleeves. Lawrence is back and better than before.

(Photo fair use)

Lawrence brought depth to a teenage girl dealing with unimaginable horrors. The emotions of Katniss ranged from extreme gratitude and love to a merciless anger to rock bottom sadness and anxiety. Lawrence did it all, and more.

But every leading lady needs a good cast of actors and actresses to assist her. Hutcherson brought a softness and sweetness to an otherwise violent film with Peeta.

Overall, the returning characters outdid themselves, and have been consistent in their performances throughout the trilogy. The film welcomed some new characters as well. The highly anticipated, charming Finnick Odair was cast to Sam Claflin. Claflin had big shoes to fill as the Capitol’s heart-throb; charming, sexy, and utterly irresistible. And that is exactly what he brought to the screen. Also joining him are first-timers Jena Malone (Johanna Mason), Lynn Cohen (Mags), and Philip Seymour Hoffman (Plutarch Heavensbee). Each of these characters played vital roles in the books, and the actors did an exceptional job portraying them on the screen. There were many creative ideas for the film, yet the cast was one of the strongest decisions the director made. Each actor had a particular role that helped put all the pieces of the puzzle in the right place and fit the character seamlessly.

The hardest part about creating movies based off books is the details in the books are so drawn out and particular, that if they were to include every single detail, it would have made for a four-hour movie. Thus, choosing what stays and what goes when transitioning from the pages to the screen is critical. It could potentially make or break the movie.

The pieces left out were so small I hardly noticed nor cared. The directors and writers took things out very subtly and tastefully, but didn’t dare tamper with the main plot line or characters.

The only real downfall was the “scare scenes.” They were set-up in the same fashion as the first movie so the formula was a bit more predictable.

The visuals, settings, and audio really brought Catching Fire to life. In the book, each district and character had a very specific look to them. The Capitol was completely transformed, and was so much bigger and richer compared to the first movie. Plus, the arena was changed in every aspect from last year’s Games. Each Capitol citizen had such an individualized and dramatic costume, all the way down to the nail polish, where each one was very specifically designed. The other districts clearly reflected their various industries.
But Lawrence’s costumes were the most impressive of them all, especially her “wedding” dress. It was gorgeous, pristine, and dazzling. When she spun on stage, it morphed into a dark, breathtaking, and powerful dress that resembled a Mockingjay.

Days later, I am still coming down from my utter awe and excitement with this movie. I never thought books could be brought to life in such a detailed and clever way, but they did in *Catching Fire*.

364 days to go until the next movie.

| Rating: PG-13 DVD release date + Ultraviolet Digital Copy: March 2014, currently still in theaters |
| Starring: Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson, Sam Clafflin Runtime: 146 minutes |
| Stars: ★★★★★ out of 5 |