

WORDS OLIVER CHIANG

WAITING TO PREVAIL

Spiderman, Batman, the X-Men — even Hellboy, for crying out loud — have all received their Hollywood treatments, so the fact that venerated comic-book publisher Marvel's first superhero team, the Fantastic Four, hadn't yet hit the popcorn stadiums was as inconceivable as Superman falling victim to a bad-hair day. The foursome has finally gotten its long-overdue close-up, with the help of director Tim Story, and the question now is — was it worth the wait?

At the outset of the film, Dr Reed Richards (Ioan Gruffudd), accompanied by right-hand man Ben Grimm (Michael Chiklis), visits former college chum and billionaire Dr Victor Von Doom (Julian McMahon). Richards wants to use Doom's space station to conduct a study on some cosmic radiation that may lead to cures for diseases... or something. Doom agrees and brings along his girlfriend and research director, the voluptuous Susan Storm (Jessica Alba) — who is incidentally Richards' ex — and her impetuous brother, pilot Johnny Storm (Chris Evans).

Something goes wrong (*surprise!*) and when the funky cosmic rays are finished bombarding the group, each begins to develop strange powers. Reed becomes the literally pliable Mr Fantastic. Sue can disappear and create force-fields as Invisible Girl. Johnny's a pyromaniac's best friend as the Human Torch and Ben becomes the near-invulnerable Thing (think "Hulk", but orange and crusty-skinned). Dr Doom, meanwhile, starts becoming metal and developing an affinity for electrical sockets.

You would think that having superpowers ought to make anyone happy, but promptly after a bout of heroics, the four hole themselves up in Reed's laboratory to find a "cure" for their condition. Ben, the most visibly transformed member, is understandably having the hardest time coping. Chiklis creates a sympathetic character in the Thing, portraying an honest guy a bit rough around the edges (the pun was just begging for it), trying to deal with his burdens. Sue is the quartet's tireless peacemaker, who's also trying to get through to the clueless Reed — though with looks like Alba's, it's hard to see why that is a difficulty.



Only Johnny seems to be relishing his new abilities, and here Evans plays up the reckless and wisecracking hothead with enjoyable flair. Dr Doom is appreciating his new powers too, except that he's gone kind of evil. Also, he wants the Fantastic Four dead, because they are somehow responsible, in his opinion, for his current romantic and financial woes.

At this point you may begin to surmise that plot is not the film's strong point — no twists or complex motives, nor even a little megalomaniacal scheme for world domination, as many critics have complained. It's also tempting to draw comparisons with other recent superhero films. *Fantastic Four* feels a bit a campy; *Batman Begins* is brooding, gritty adult fare. *Fantastic Four* has action sequences that meet the bar, but fail to raise it significantly; *Spider-Man 2* has high-octane power struggles.

Instead of following suit with the others, the film takes a decidedly different tack in its direction. From the get-go, the superheroes' identities are never a secret. They live in a world that regards them as either passing celebrities or freakish mutants.

Then, too, these heroes are far from perfect. They don't understand each other — they often don't even like each other. They fight all the time, so much so that it only takes Dr Doom minimal effort to set them off on one another. But both in spite and because of this, at the end of the day, they become family. This is the point Story drives home, and it's here at the character's struggles where we can personally connect.

Feeling ignored and frustrated? Invisible Girl feels you. Or, as the Thing puts it, "You think you got problems, you take a good look, pal."

Faced with the daunting task of cramming decades of comic-book history into an hour-and-change introductory film, Story does struggle with the pacing. However, he keeps things light and fun, resulting in a movie that doesn't try to take itself too seriously.

So was it worth the wait? Is Galactus a planet-devouring colossus from Taa? (Yes.) It's certainly a good enough ride to make you eagerly await a fantastic sequel. 

