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MOVIES 8:23 a.m. Friday, May 7, 2010

Text size:

'Iron Man 2' bound to draw moviegoers

Goal of director, cast was give the ticket buyers 'a good time.'

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By Gina Piccalo
For the AJC

Robert Downey Jr. was speaking in his usual rapid-fire way, those nervous dark eyes darting around the vast hotel ballroom, chiding the hordes of movie-junket journalists for ruining his grand entrance by crowding the dais too soon.

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Francois Duhamel, Paramount Pictures

Robert Downey Jr. is back as billionaire industrialist Tony Stark, aka Iron Man, in "Iron Man 2."

Indeed, the usually forlorn group of reporters gathered at the Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles was uncharacteristically eager on this day. "Iron Man 2," which opens today, marks the beginning of the busy summer blockbuster season. And its high-caliber cast, including Gwyneth Paltrow, Don Cheadle, Samuel Jackson, Mickey Rourke and Scarlett Johansson in a cat suit, makes it one of the year's most anticipated movies.

When someone asked whether Downey and "Iron Man 2" director Jon Favreau felt any pressure to live up to the 2008 original, which earned \$585 million worldwide and rebooted Downey's career, the actor leaned into his microphone and blurted out his answer first. "You mean, like it's past tense?" he said with characteristic bite. "I didn't sleep last night!"

Early reviews suggest "Iron Man 2" won't share the critical acclaim of its predecessor, but it probably won't matter much at the box office.

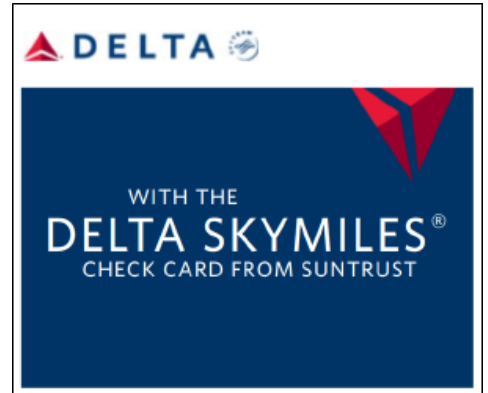
From a moviegoer's perspective, the film is a fun ride with clever dialogue and fantastic performances. Favreau, for his part, is more confident. "We knew people were going to show up," he said of "Iron Man 2." "We just wanted to make sure everybody who showed up had a good time."

"Iron Man 2," inspired by the Cold War-era Marvel Comics series, is set just six months after billionaire playboy Tony

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...series, is set just six months after Iron Man's previous Tony Stark (Downey) publicly reveals that he's the one who has been flying around in the shiny red suit fighting bad guys. The celebrity hasn't been good for him. He lives large. Too large, it turns out, for his battery-powered heart, which has a fast-approaching expiration date. Meanwhile, Russian ex-con Ivan Vanko (Rourke) is readying himself for revenge on Stark on the grandest scale.

Rourke's entrance as Whiplash is one of the film's most spectacular scenes and his otherwise quiet performance brings surprising gravity to a comic book villain. Fortunately, he's far more Viggo Mortensen in "Eastern Promises" than the purple plume-adorned, red tights-wearing Whiplash of the comic book.

Strangely Rourke and his memorable exchanges with Sam Rockwell's oily trouble-maker Justin Hammer bring some respite from the breakneck pace of the rest of the film. The story takes lots of jagged detours, the result of a heavily improvisational set. So much, in fact, that writer Justin Theroux, a lifelong Iron Man fan who is new to the franchise, was often rewriting scenes a dozen or more times during the shoot.

At times, the script — particularly the scene depicting Stark as a falling-down drunk — seemed to embody the real-life Downey and his love-hate relationship with fame. At the press conference, Downey skirted admission of the parallels between Stark's struggle and his own. "The mental and emotional aspects of developing Tony were for me a lot more, it's strange to say personal, because it's not necessarily related to my life," he said, dropping the thought entirely.

Instead, Downey reminded everyone of his drug-fueled infamy in another way. When asked whether, when he was growing up, he'd ever donned a super-hero costume, Downey quipped: "Growing up, no. But in my mid-30s. In Palm Springs. Right before an arrest. Yes. It was a premonition."

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