



Movie Marketing Madness: Punisher - War Zone

(MMM - 12/4/08)

Nothing like the third time to the well, right?

The Punisher is a comic book character that has not had an easy time translating from the page to the screen. Originally portrayed by Dolph Lundgren in 1989, the movie was alright but didn't do a great job at actually telling any sort of interesting story. It also caught fanboy flack (quite an achievement in the pre-Internet days) for more or less eliminating the character's trademark skulls, relegating them to the handles of the knives he carried.

Then there was 2004's Thomas Jane-starring version which was miles better at capturing the spirit of the character, even if some of the individual elements (I'm looking at you, Travolta) left something to be desired.

So to date the best appearance by The Punisher on film seems to be Brody's line in Mallrats that he left a copy of a Punisher: War Journal at Renee's house.

Which leads us to Punisher: War Zone. The movie is a reboot of the character, not picking up at all from the 2004 version, or if so very loosely. This time Lionsgate is opting not to try again at an origin story but is setting up the vigilante against an honest to goodness villain from the comics, Jigsaw. That's very much the approach Universal took earlier this year with the Hulk, deciding that origin stories have too many opportunities to get bogged down in uninteresting (they feel) character developments and that the audience wants more action.

The Posters

The first teaser poster that was released was pretty much solely a branding effort. It showed the iconic Punisher skull insignia, black against a white background and riddled with bullets. This was an attempt to make it clear to the audience that the movie would be sticking with the core components of the character (violence and violence) while not showing much of anything to that audience.

That was followed, I believe, by a series of four one-sheets that finally unveiled the look of the newly revamped Punisher as portrayed by Stevenson. Each showed him in various stages of close-up, all with him sporting a very serious looking gun and looking extremely dour. I'm not quite sure what the goal of releasing so many versions was since they're all of the same character and all just variations on a theme, but I suppose this was a play to give people looking forward to the movie options to choose from if they were buying one for their bedroom wall.

After those was a series that was decidedly shinier, though still in a downbeat and dirty sort of way. The first featured the same skull logo that adorned the teaser poster but this one was sans bullet holes and appeared to be made from something far more sparkly. I'm not sure if this is supposed to look like a city at night from above or something but it's alright if essentially pointless. There was also a blood-red version released that looked like it was the logo made from blood smears on a concrete wall.

A lenticular poster was also released that featured Frank Castle with guns drawn and guns

surrounding him that served the sole purpose of making it abundantly clear the movie would feature lots and lots of guns.

The final theatrical poster cut out the over-dramatization and simply presented the character up front and center with guns at his side (a little less threatening while not losing the imposing factor) and standing in front of a blood red skull. It's probably the most effective of the bunch since it doesn't try so hard to present the movie as kill-kill all the time, instead positioning Frank Castle as a morose action character.

The Trailers

The first trailer is little but a teaser reel, giving us a flash-bang introduction to the tragedy that turned Frank Castle into The Punisher before introducing him as the sole dealer of justice in a completely corrupt city. Lots and lots of violence then ensues as he seeks to wipe out the bad guys he holds responsible for his family's murder while at the same time staying out of reach of the actual law.

It certainly introduces us to the visual look of the movie, which is all harsh but sparse lighting and rough, dirty streets and interiors.

The second spot goes a bit further into introducing Jigsaw, the movie's villain and the focal point of The Punisher's anger. It then sets Castle out on the mission to bring down Jigsaw's operations. It contains a lot of the same footage as the first trailer, with most of the new stuff involving Jigsaw and revealing how they've translated him to the screen.

The major weak point of the trailer is the dialogue. Ray Stevenson is saddled with lines like, "Sometimes I'd like to get my hands on God" and he's actually forced to say, "See you in hell." These laugh-out-loud lines take the viewer out of the moment that's being created by the violence and other parts of the trailers, unfortunately, and raise worries that the entire rest of the movie is going to contain writing like that.

Online

As the front page of the official website loads you'll see more of an image appearing, with blood running down a tombstone with the names of the now deceased (or at least believed to be deceased) Castle family on it.

Unsurprisingly the site's content navigation is rendered as a free fire zone. All the section headings that appear around the skull in the center (the same shiny version that was featured on one of the posters) are bulls-eyes. And your mouse turns into cross-hairs as you move it around.

Let's start with "The Film." Really the only thing there is a two paragraph Synopsis of the movie's story, making it clear that this is not another origin story but the pitting of the Punisher against a crime boss named Jigsaw. That's the first paragraph, with the second being an extended credit block.

"Cast & Crew" gives you the information on the film's major players (though even one day before opening there are quite a few slots still labeled as "Coming Soon"). Most of the career overviews emphasize the actor's background in violent action movies, an attempt it seems to heighten their credibility with the movie's perceived fans.

"Media & Games" is where you'll find a back of Wallpapers and Icons and movie-themed MySpace skins, which speaks volumes on the target audience the studio has in mind.

There's also a link to a Multiplayer Game that's moderately entertaining. You can play either against a live opponent or as a single player against the computer if you so choose. Finally under this section is a Mashup activity that lets you drag video and audio clips as well as music, images and sound effects into your own creation of a trailer for the film. The Mashup is actually a contest that's giving away Xbox Arcade consoles to the five best mashup creators.

The "Gallery" section contains 12 stills from the movie that you can click on to expand to full screen mode. "Videos" has both trailers, an introductory video from director Lexi Alexander and a Music Video that's pretty much only for those people who aren't already annoyed by the soundtrack music that plays constantly throughout the entire site.

Finally there's "Legacy," an online comic that leads into the story of the movie. This is a great idea that I wish more movies, especially those based on properties like comics and similar media, would utilize more as it gives the audience a starting point to the world of the movie.

Advertising and Cross-Promotions

There was a pretty significant online ad campaign for the movie, mostly through ads that featured one of the trailers or other footage from the film itself. I didn't see a lot of static ads, so the studio must have felt that showing off the movie would serve better than just presenting an image to the online audience. A sprinkling of TV ads were also seen, including some during broadcasts of other comic-based movies on channels like FX and others.

Marvel didn't seem to put as much of its weight behind supporting the movie's launch, perhaps because unlike this year's Iron Man and Incredible Hulk it wasn't the actual producer of the film. But it did do things like promote the tie-in video game and create a free e-comic titled *The Punisher Saga*, available as a free download. The comic contained a high-level overview of the character and some of his key moments. It not only served to promote the movie but also acted as a final recap before the publisher re-launched the comic series with a new #1 issue in January.

Media and Publicity

The movie suffered a major blow right at a time when it should have been generating its biggest amount of buzz. Just as the San Diego Comic-Con was happening in July it was reported that director Lexi Alexander had been unceremoniously pushed off the film because of undefined creative differences. Some of that turned out to be bunk, or at the very least the differences appear to have been ironed out as Alexander did appear to be involved in publicity for the movie as its opening date approached.

There was also a lot of outcry (some of it warranted, some of it just piling on for the sake of piling on) when it appeared Lionsgate was going to be pushing for a PG-13 cut of the movie, something that would seriously impact its appeal to fans of uber-violence.

But beyond the controversy there was little sustained buzz about the movie, which may have been why some of these conflicts were inflated beyond their reality.

Overall

Lionsgate has mounted a decent campaign that certainly has a target audience in mind: Young adult men who are big fans of industrial metal music (or whatever its designation is) and love hard-core action movies. The entire push is focused around making it as clear as it

possibly can that the movie will feature tons and tons of gun-play and face-offs with the bad guys and almost nothing in the way of character introspection or anything as fuzzy as that.

The big problem being faced, though, is that the titular character is very much a downer. He's dark and brooding and angry and out for vengeance. That's going to be a hard sell in the current societal climate, where audiences might be looking for something more escapist as an entertainment choice.

It's also going to be hurt by the fact that there isn't the publicity push that has propelled other comic adaptations going on. The entirety of the media universe hasn't turned its attention to the movie like it did with films earlier this year. That turns Punisher: War Zone into a mid-level release about a character that's hard to connect emotionally with.

By creating a campaign that doesn't try too hard for mainstream appeal but instead says "If you're into body counts we're your pick for the weekend" the studio should, though, overcome some of those stumbling blocks.