

After special effects, 'Independence Day' falls flat

By Bill Dupre
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No, we are not alone - there's this horrible, horrible thing out there called "Independence Day." Meanwhile, the search for intelligent life continues. ...

Take away the 50 minutes of computer-generated effects (which are pretty doggone slick) and what you have here is a cheesy '50s era sci-fi flick with a bloated budget. Too bad "Mystery Science Theater 3000" isn't around anymore; this could have been a fun movie with some android-generated commentary thrown in.

Director and co-writer Roland Emmerich ("Stargate") brings on the bear in the first frame: a gigando alien spacecraft is hurtling toward Earth, where it lacks into orbit around our fair planet, dispatching a multitude of smaller flying saucers (a mere 15 miles wide each) which settle in over each of the planet's major cities, causing widespread concern over the future of the human race and messing up TV reception.

From there, "Independence Day" becomes an ensemble piece wracked by chaos. Emmerich gives us vignettes of daily life around the planet as the realization that something very strange is happening settles in. "ID" brings back the all-star cast of the old disaster movies with everyone from Bill Pullman as President Whitmire, a former fighter pilot and all-around swell guy (how come the movies never have any trouble coming up with terrific presidents?), to Randy Quaid as a whiskey-sodden crop duster in New Mexico. And these two - you guessed it - become partners in the final moments when it's do or die against the evil empire from way out there. The trouble with "Independence Day" is that it so rapidly becomes a relentless barrage of spectacular effects that there's no time left for developing a real plot, or even a plausible sense of dread that could have truly kept the audience at seat's edge. We see entire blocks of skyscrapers reduced to ash in seconds as the aliens unleash their fearsome light beams upon us, but we never get close enough to any of the characters to share in that very special sense of unease that comes from knowing that an unknown power is about to immolate your hometown.

The result is that "Independence Day" plays out like a two-hour trailer. From the relentless, deafening soundtrack (the day-of-doom orchestral music must have been put on an endless-loop cassette) to the dimbulb applause lines that the actors spit out like one-liners at a one-upmanship contest, this movie is simply exhausting without ever truly being thrilling.

It seems pointless to talk about acting, since, despite the all-star cast, "Independence Day" could have been shot in Claymation with about the same dramatic impact. How much longer will it be before the studios realize that they could save mucho bucks by having the actors computer-generated, right along with all those tiresome special effects? Disney did it with "Toy Story" and ended up with a pretty good movie. Who needs Jeff Goldblum?

So, with not much being offered on the Earthling side of the lifeforms spectrum, what about the dreaded aliens? Do we get to see these evil critters plotting to destroy our island Earth? Does Emmerich give us a peek into the workings of these demented minds from so many light-years away? Nope. Except for a brief scene in which Will Smith punches out one of the invaders, we get nary a glance at the invaders; their wicked ships and laser beams are all we see. "Independence Day" is bloodless (in every sense of the word) and very nearly lifeless. It commits the unforgivable sin for a summer sci-fi thriller: It fails, utterly, to engage the audience.

If nonstop destruction and whiz-bang chase scenes between F-14s and flying saucer fighters is your idea of cinematic ecstasy, then you might enjoy "ID." But if you're looking for real thrills and chills in an extraterrestrial mode, stay home

and rent "Alien." Even the second time around, it's bound to be spookier than this twaddle.

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Photo caption: Jeff Goldblum plays a techno-geek who comes up with a plan to save the planet in 'Independence Day.'

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