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Date: 96-07-01 08:34:15 EDT

Independence Day (Sci-fi, Color, PG-13, 2:25)
By Todd McCarthy

HOLLYWOOD (Variety) - ``Independence Day'' is the biggest B movie ever made, the mother of all doomsday dramas. A spectacularly scaled mix of '50s-style alien invader science fiction, '70s disaster epics and all-season gung-ho military actioners, this airborne leviathan features a bunch of agreeably cardboard characters saving the human race from mass extermination in a way that proves as unavoidably entertaining as it is hopelessly cornball.

A definitive popcorn picture, it arrives on the wings of a stupendous marketing campaign and promises to cast as huge a shadow commercially, both domestically and around the world, as do the monster ships that fill the skies onscreen.

Working in a vein that is unabashedly hokey, contrived and ultra-patriotic, the ``Stargate'' team of director Roland Emmerich and co-writer/producer Dean Devlin clearly had great fun combining sure-fire elements from a bunch of mainstream genres in a way that is frankly intended to be overwhelming.

For the most part it is, at least in the sense that the sheer volume and variety of mass destruction, casualties, moments of dire jeopardy, opportunities for heroism and, above all, special effects, are almost certainly without precedent.

This is, in effect, the anti-``Close Encounters,'' a throwback to ominous, paranoid thrillers such as ``The War of the Worlds,'' ``The Day the Earth Stood Still,'' ``When Worlds Collide,'' ``Invaders From Mars'' and television's ``V,'' a story in which the visitors from space have absolutely no interest in making nice with the earthlings and, in fact, have every intention of wiping them out so they can have Earth's resources to themselves. Lay on top of that an Irwin Allen aesthetic sense and 10,000 special effects and you have a definition of high-concept.

The magnitude of the global threat is awesomely established in the teaser opening, which shows the black mother ship, itself a quarter the size of the moon, sailing through the lunar orbit on its way to its rendezvous with Earth. Shortly let loose are some 15-mile-wide saucers, which descend to hover directly over New York City, Washington and Los Angeles, along with various world capitals, causing no end of wonderment and panic.

In vintage disaster-pic fashion, a host of characters from all walks of life is sketched in. For starters, there is David (Jeff Goldblum), a New York computer genius whose ability to analyze the aliens' communications code with his laptop could help expose their Achilles heel; Capt. Steven Hiller (Will Smith), a hot-dog fighter pilot from L.A. with an unfulfilled dream to be an astronaut; and U.S. President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman), a rather green national leader widely regarded as a wimp despite his background as a combat pilot during the Gulf War.

Since David's ex-wife, Constance (Margaret Colin), works for the president, David, along with his kvetchy father, Julius (Judd Hirsch), gains entree to the White House to announce his theory that a catastrophic countdown is under way. When some ``Welcome Wagon'' helicopters flashing ``Close Encounters''-style lights are summarily blasted out of the sky by the aliens, it becomes clear that the visitors have come not for a picnic, but for a barbecue.

Although scenes of the lumbering warships parking themselves over the cities are eye-fuls in themselves, the first real fireworks come 45 minutes in, as the spacecrafts open up their hulls to expose giant electromagnetic ray guns that simultaneously zap the soaring Library Tower in Los Angeles (where a bunch of SoCal nitwits are celebrating in welcome of the aliens), the Empire State Building and the White House. As Air Force One spectacularly manages to take off just inches ahead of onrushing flames, uncontrollable firestorms result in

the destruction of all three cities and millions of casualties.

And that's just act one. Air attacks on the alien ships reveal that they are surrounded by protective shields that ward off all weapons, but when hundreds of crustacean-like alien fighter ships zip out to engage the American planes, Hiller manages to make one crash and returns the gruesome-looking pilot to Area 51, a top-secret Nevada base where the president has taken refuge. There, 24 floors underground, the resident loony genius (Brent Spiner) reveals the existence of an alien spaceship captured long ago that just may be in working order, opening the door on a long-shot counterattack that plays out on the third day of the story, July 4.

Without giving the game away, it's fair to say that everybody gets into the heroic final act: the president dons his flight suit once again, Hiller and David fly into outer space to take on the mother ship, and even an alcoholic Vietnam vet (Randy Quaid) has his chance to go down in history.

This is hardly a movie for viewers interested in plausibility or intelligence in storytelling, but Emmerich throws spectacularly pulpy events at the audience at such a pace that carping about logic is moot. It's more a matter of carefully selected elements having been stirred together with the obvious but effective touch Cecil B. DeMille learned how to apply not long after the dawn of cinema: cataclysm, elemental human ties, individual jeopardy, the boldest possible opposition of good and evil, life-and-death struggle, a little religion, brotherhood of the underdogs, ultimate triumph through ingenuity and heroism. It's all been done before, just not on this global scale.

The never-ending special effects, while massively spectacular, are not always that special, ranging from terrific computer-generated airborne battles to frankly old-fashioned-looking matte shots and model work.

The cutting-edge perfection of effects in Cameron and Spielberg films is replaced here by work that looks more homemade, particularly toward the end in some faintly cheesy composite shots. It's the difference between a \$100 million-plus picture and a \$71 million effort, which is what this one reportedly is, and it shouldn't make a whole lot of difference at the box office.

Similarly, the cast is just a cut under all-star, but that shouldn't matter either. Playing the main action hero, Smith pushes the cocky arrogance to Mach 3, and audiences will eat it up. Goldblum does a riff on his offbeat scientist bit from "Jurassic Park" and is perfectly winning, but Pullman, who seems to be barely suppressing a smirk at times, will have people asking if he isn't just a bit young to be president.

Rather more credible is Mary McDonnell as the very Hillary-like First Lady, but she has little to do after being rescued by Hiller's spunky stripper girlfriend (Vivica A. Fox). Hirsch becomes overbearing rather quickly as the doubting Jewish father who suddenly dons a yarmulke when the going gets tough. Equally broad comic relief is supplied by Quaid as the washed-up aviator who rides out in style, a bit like Slim Pickens in "Dr. Strangelove."

The main characters are involved in variously complicated amours that the alien invasion quickly helps them put in perspective, just as a fast spot-check reveals that traditional foes in the Middle East have seen the wisdom of putting aside their differences in the face of the extraterrestrial threat.

This gargantuan undertaking feels assembled rather than directed, and it took a foreigner to create what could arguably be the most patriotic film since John Wayne rode into the sunset. The production job by all hands is enormous and sufficiently skilled to make the film play effectively, even if it's not always state-of-the-art.

The picture delivers its scariest scene when it momentarily decides to become a monster movie during an alien autopsy, but violence is mostly general and directed at objects rather than people, thereby further increasing the potential kid audience.

Capt. Steven Hiller Will Smith
President Thomas J. Whitmore Bill Pullman
David Levinson Jeff Goldblum
Marilyn Whitmore Mary McDonnell
Julius Levinson Judd Hirsch
Constance Spano Margaret Colin
Russell Casse Randy Quaid
Gen. William Grey Robert Loggia
Albert Nimziki James Rebhorn
Marty Gilbert Harvey Fierstein
Major Mitchell Adam Baldwin
Dr. Brakish Okun Brent Spiner
Miguel James Duval
Jasmine Dubrow Vivica A. Fox
Alicia Lisa Jakub
Dylan Ross Bagley
Patricia Whitmore Mae Whitman
Capt. Watson Bill Smitrovich
Tiffany Kiersten Warren
Capt. Jimmy Wilder Harry Connick Jr.

A 20th Century Fox release of a Centropolis Entertainment production. Produced by Dean Devlin. Executive producers, Roland Emmerich, Ute Emmerich, William Fay.

Directed by Roland Emmerich. Screenplay, Dean Devlin, Emmerich. Camera (Deluxe color, Super 35 Panavision widescreen), Karl Walter Lindenlaub; editor, David Brenner; music, David Arnold; production design, Oliver Scholl, Patrick Tatopoulos; art direction, Jim Teegarden; set design, Pamela Klamer, Sean Haworth, Mick Curkurs, Julia Levine; set decoration, Jim Erickson; costume design, Joseph Porro; sound (Dolby), Jeff Wexler; visual effects supervisors, Volker Engel, Douglas Smith; digital effects supervisor/producer, Tricia Ashford; alien creature effects, Tatopoulos; visual effects producer, Terry Clotiaux; miniature pyrotechnics/mechanical effects supervisor, Joseph Viskocil; model shop supervisor, Michael Joyce; mechanical effects supervisor, Clay Pinney; stunt coordinator, Dan Bradley; associate producer, Peter Winther; assistant director, Sergio Mimica-Gezzan; additional camera, Ueli Steiger; second unit director, Devlin; second unit camera, Jonathan Taylor; aerial second unit director/coordinator, Kevin LaRosa; casting, Wendy Kurtzman. Reviewed at Plaza Theater, L.A., June 25, 1996.

Reuters/Variety

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