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'Independence Day': Space Aliens and Chance to Save Planet

By JANET MASLIN

For months we've been told that "Independence Day," the latter-day "War of the Worlds" in which extraterrestrials set their sights on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, would be the mother of all this year's summer action movies.

And now, like the huge sky-darkening spaceships that the film shows hovering over America's major cities and making their presence felt worldwide, it's here.

Guess what: "Independence Day" lives up to expectations in a rush of gleeful, audience-friendly exhilaration, with inspiring notions of bravery that depart nicely from the macho cynicism of this movie season. Its innocence and enthusiasm are so welcome that this new spin on "Star Wars" is likely to wreak worldwide box-office havoc, the kind that will make the space aliens' onscreen antics look like small change.

With its own true sense of spectacle despite an obvious admiration for certain blockbuster landmarks (like "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," "Top Gun," "Alien," the Indiana Jones movies), "Independence Day" sees sci-fi Armageddon in good old disaster-movie style, through the eyes of a Noah's Ark assortment of characters.

All are Everyman types, even if one (Bill Pullman) happens to be the president of the United States. Before he was president, he was once punched in the nose by David (Jeff Goldblum), the mild-mannered scientist who winds up fighting an air war against flying saucers. "You know how I'm always trying to save the planet?" asks David, who is dutiful about recycling. "Well, here's my chance."

The planet sure is in peril, although Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin (the director and writer of "Stargate" as well as the far better "Independence Day") keep the crisis seeming mercifully benign. Here's the rare action movie without human villains, close-up violence, gory special effects or gratuitous obscenity.

True, fireballs destroy whole cities, but the film's ebullient comic-book sensibility takes much of the sting out of that. Children in the audience who can tolerate the only real goo (in one alien autopsy scene) and who understand that this is only a movie should be vastly entertained by the rest.

Spanning three days (July 2 to 4) and the usual locations (the Pentagon, a secret research installation in the desert, the moon), "Independence Day" begins by introducing the threat of doom.

Roiling clouds, which are among the film's many well-wrought special effects, signal the arrival of strange, tentacled imperialists from space. With well-orchestrated precision, they position huge spacecraft all around our planet and get ready to make places like Wall Street, the White House and downtown Los Angeles nothing more than memories.

As destruction looms, President Whitmore (Pullman) shows deep concern. This latest nice-guy inhabitant of the Bill Clinton-Michael Douglas White House has been flagging in the polls, and if there's any headache he doesn't need, it's an invading army flotilla from outer space.

Meanwhile, the film has great fun introducing a random array of other characters who will soon band together, if they aren't wiped out first. Among the principal heroes are Goldblum, Randy Quaid as a boozy ex-pilot and an especially good Will Smith as Capt. Steven Hiller, a military man who dreams of a NASA job and is involved with Jasmine (Vivica Fox), an extremely clean-cut stripper.

Two reasons it's impossible to resist "Independence Day": because of its pitch-perfect cartoonish dialogue ("Now you're NEVER gonna get to fly the space shuttle if you marry a stripper!") and because the captain, like Indiana Jones, is so unflappably tough. When he finds himself, after a grueling chase, face to face with an alien in one of the film's few such close encounters, Hill is so fed up with the creature that he just hauls off and slugs it.

The film's first day is devoted to bad news from beyond, with Harvey

Fierstein and Harry Connick Jr. among the many actors in brief but colorful roles.

Meanwhile, the film revels in the jokey potential of its situation, with daytime-television type references to alien sexual abuse, with mention of Elvis and with a teen-age boy who tells his girlfriend, "This could be our last night on earth!"

When Hill quarrels with Jasmine and asks, "Why are you acting like this," she opens the curtains and points to the huge spaceship hovering overhead. "That's why!" she says.

And when David drives to the Capital with his pesty Jewish father (Judd Hirsch, sounding like Jackie Mason and providing the film's one obnoxious, regrettable ethnic stereotype), the father says: "What's the rush? You think we'll get to Washington, it won't be there?" Well, as a matter of fact, it won't.

Anyone appalled that movie audiences can enjoy such widespread catastrophe can be assured that "Independence Day" is really about togetherness and catharsis, as it demonstrates on the Fourth of July. Up into the sky go a fleet of newly minted heroes, cowboys fighting the alien space fleet in a set of spectacular air battles. (There are no cowgirls, however. Female characters like the president's close adviser, played by Margaret Colin, stay on the ground.) The film's special effects here are as exciting and believable as entirely fictitious episodes can be.

And yet the effects, while galvanizing, don't upstage the characters. From the president up in the sky to the first lady (Mary McDonnell), who is of course thrown together with the kindly stripper, the characters keep their humanity alive and well.

As for the slimy, sinister aliens, they have novelty value but aren't seen in person much, though President Whitmore meets one in a top-secret laboratory presided over by Dr. Okun, the wild-eyed scientist played by Brent Spiner. ("As you can imagine, they don't let us out much," Dr. Okun says.) When the president asks what the aliens want from Earthlings, the one-word answer delivers all the right chills.

The film's neatest trick, aside from placing the Statue of Liberty on its side and drumming up such waves of gung-ho good feeling, is its idea that an alien fleet can be vanquished by computer wizardry. See for yourself how it's done.

"Independence Day" is rated . It includes cartoonish scenes of widespread destruction but almost no close-range violence. Profanity and sexual references are also exceptionally scant for a movie of this genre. One brief sequence involving aliens could alarm young children.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

'INDEPENDENCE DAY'

Directed by Roland Emmerich; written by Emmerich and Dean Devlin; director of photography, Karl Walter Lindenlaub; edited by David Brenner; music by David Arnold; production designers, Patrick Tatopoulos and Oliver Scholl; visual-effects supervisors, Volker Engel and Douglas Smith; produced by Devlin; released by 20th Century Fox.

WITH: Will Smith (Capt. Steven Hiller), Bill Pullman (the president), Jeff Goldblum (David), Mary McDonnell (Marilyn), Judd Hirsch (Julius), Margaret Colin (Constance), Randy Quaid (Russell), Robert Loggia (General Grey), James Rebhorn (Secretary Nimziki), Harvey Fierstein (Marty), Harry Connick, Jr. (Jimmy), Vivica Fox (Jasmine), James Duval (Miguel) and Brent Spiner (Dr. Okun).

Running time: 135 minutes. This film is rated PG.

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