

Time
Critics' Choice
7/3/96

Critic: Brandon Judell

"Independence Day" is more than a film. It is an event, one hatched by the savvy 20th Century Fox publicity department and a media in need of such hoopla. So well have these two forces accomplished their tasks, that there was an actual buzz of excitement among the usually very jaded movie-goers attending an advance unspooling of this epic-wannabe. Then, when the opening credits first appeared, there was great applause and even cheers.

From the sensational trailers we've been imbued with for months, in theaters and on TV, one can't help but bring an air of air of exaggerated excitement and expectation to this film. We have been promised to be entertained like we have never been entertained before. Our world will be destroyed, as will the White House, Paris, London, Rome and Bloomingdale's. (Why we as a society get so aroused at the notion of seeing our environment decimated is no doubt grist for some future social historian.)

Happily, "Independence Day, for the most part, lives up to everything it has promised. The visual effects are scintillating. There are giant space ships unexpectedly hovering over our major cities; our skies turn hues New Age believers can only achieve in their deepest meditations; there's a flickering hope of friendship with a new species more advanced than ours, sudden disillusionment, then destruction by fire and explosion, buildings imploding, autos lifting up and falling upon other cars, plus helicopters lighting up and disappearing like fireflies. Mankind is in disarray. This is Dante to the nth degree. Can there be an escape? Is there no chance for survival?

If only the plot and dialogue were as much feasts for our minds as the pulverization of our everyday existence is a treat for our eyes. Unlike the recent "The Arrival" where the special effects were built into a truly clever scenario, director Roland Emmerich and his co-writer Dean Devlin has created characters that are for the most part only secondary to the action. We barely care whether they live or die, and in fact we really hope they do die. This is 1974's "Earthquake" redux only without Chuck Heston, Marjoe Gortner and Victoria Principal. Thank the Lord for small blessings.

Anyway, the time is now and huge spaceships are suspended over our major cities. What is President Whitmore (Bill Pullman) to do? If he listens to David (Jeff Goldblum), a brilliant cable TV channel employee and ex-spouse of Presidential aide Constance (Margaret Colin), he'll run for his life. These aliens are planning to destroy us.

For the rest of the film, we watch as the President tries one plan after another to save our planet from the foreign "locusts" who desire an Earth barren of even cockroaches. Assisting the cause is Capt. Steven Hiller (Will Smith), an ace pilot who's in love with a stripper and Russell (an overacting Randy Quaid), a crazed alcoholic crop duster who last fought in Vietnam. Who'll win? There's never ever a doubt.

But who'll make hokey patriotic speeches, get married, re-fall in love, etc.? Almost everyone gets tinged with daytime soap opera here. As with their often entertaining hit "Stargate," Emmerich and Dean are again amazing visual technicians, but like so many other filmmakers today, they are making movies in tribute to other movies, not ideas. The core of "Independence Day" is like a tape of "Star Wars" that has been recopied a few dozen times. It's fuzzy. Are these folks trying to say something? Not for a second. Just re-watch James Cameron's "Terminator 2: Judgment" and you'll be able to see the difference between a film that has a brain and one that has straw between its ears.

But in the end is "Independence Day" worth seeing? Resoundingly yes. More than once? Yes again. Like cotton candy it's a high caloric treat that's always fun for the taste buds but little else. (Well, to be honest, a film does have to be commended a bit for letting a black man and a Jew save the world together in this day and age.)

DIRECTOR: Roland Emmerich
CAST: Will Smith, Bill Pullman, Jeff Goldblum, Mary McDonnell, Judd Hirsch, Margaret Colin, Randy Quaid, Robert Loggia, James Rebhorn, Harvey Fierstein, Harry Connick Jr., Vivica Fox, James Duval, Brent Spiner

WRITERS: Roland Emmerich, Dean Devlin
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Karl Walter Lindenlaub
EDITOR: David Brenner
MUSIC: David Arnold
PRODUCTION DESIGNERS: Patrick Tatopoulos, Oliver Scholl
VISUAL-EFFECTS SUPERVISORS: Volker Engel, Douglas Smith
PRODUCER: Dean Devlin (20th Century Fox)
GENRE: Science Fiction - PG-13 - 2:15

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