

Aliens Attack in Spielberg's 'War of the Worlds': Rick Warner

(Review. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

June 30 (Bloomberg) -- Thirty years after scaring us silly with a mechanical shark in 'Jaws,' Steven Spielberg tries to repeat the feat with digital aliens in 'War of the Worlds,' his updated version of the H.G. Wells classic about a Martian invasion of earth.

While it does produce an occasional shriek, 'War of the Worlds' isn't nearly as frightening -- or as clever -- as 'Jaws.' Despite the amazing advances in special-effects technology since 1975, the primitive man-made shark created more terror with one snap of his giant jaw than all the computer-created, octopus-like aliens combined.

Spielberg has made another fast-paced, highly watchable, mass-entertainment extravaganza that will certainly make megabucks at the box office. What's missing is the suspense of 'Jaws,' the pageantry of 'Raiders of the Lost Ark,' the magic of 'E.T.,' or the mystery of 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind.'

Maybe I've overdosed on high-tech movie wizardry, but watching the aliens stomp on buildings, vaporize victims with lightning bolts and snatch people with their creepy tentacles didn't raise my blood pressure as much as getting stuck in traffic on one of those clogged New Jersey highways that Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) and his kids use to flee the invaders in a stolen van.

Sept. 11

Even the obvious references to 9/11, such as terrified, ash-covered citizens running in the streets and a wall covered with photos of missing people, fail to resonate. ('Is it the terrorists?' Ray's daughter asks her dad after the attack begins.) Although almost four years have passed since 9/11, it's still too real and fresh in our minds to be mixed with fantasy.

Ray is a divorced dockworker who's taking care of his skittish young daughter (Dakota Fanning) and surly teenage son (Justin Chatwin) for the weekend while his ex-wife and her new husband head to Boston to visit her parents.

While standing in his backyard, Ray and his daughter witness a freakish electrical storm that whips up hurricane-force winds and knocks out all the power in his blue-collar, urban neighborhood. Before long, buildings are splitting in

half, the ground is shaking and a gigantic alien spaceship is emerging from a hole in the street, which qualifies as a big pothole even by New Jersey standards.

Strange Survivalist

These are not huggable aliens like E.T. who want to phone home; they're on a mission to crush and destroy everything and everyone in their path. And they pretty much succeed with the exception of Ray and his brood, who miraculously manage to survive as those around them die in burning trains, capsized ferries and collapsing buildings. (His getaway is aided by what appears to be the only working civilian vehicle left on the planet.)

Ray, who's been a deadbeat dad, suddenly develops the kind of ferocious protective streak you see in those National Geographic specials about mama lions and their cubs. No one -- not a 100-foot-tall killer from outer space or a loony survivalist (Tim Robbins) who offers him refuge in his farmhouse cellar -- is going to harm his children.

Spielberg wisely tells the tale through the eyes of one family, an approach that helps humanize and focus what otherwise might be a sprawling story about global disaster. Cruise is suitably intense -- maybe he was thinking of Katie -- and Robbins revels in his crazy-man cameo.

Freeman's Narration

Fanning, the 11-year-old wunderkind who's already co-starred with Robert DeNiro, Denzel Washington and Sean Penn, is a little too cutesy and emotive here; after her third or fourth scream, you just want her to shut up. Conversely, the opening and closing narration by Morgan Freeman is just the right length and perfectly pitched.

`War of the Worlds,' from DreamWorks SKG and Paramount Pictures, is playing worldwide.

--Editors: Hoelterhoff, Schatz, Todd.

Story illustration: For more information on `The War of the Worlds,' see <http://www.waroftheworlds.com>. For more cultural news from Bloomberg, see {MUSE <GO>}.

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