

'2012' makes you wish the world would end



November 13, 2009



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John Cusack tries to catch a plane in "2012" Photo: Columbia Pictures (c) 2009

The end of the world, when it comes, will hopefully not last as long as “**2012**,” a loud, frenetic and painfully long epic from Master of Disaster **Roland Emmerich**, who seems to be mad at his audience. Emmerich, cashing in on the furor over the end of the Mayan calendar, for reasons known only to himself and his co-writer, Harald Kloser, has decided to forego using much of the stuff that might have build some suspense. We hear “the Mayans knew all about this” quite a bit, but not too much of what they knew. Amazingly, Edgar Cayce and Nostradamus, who supposedly prophesied about stuff never get a mention.

Instead, Emmerich relies on the well-worn ground that filmmakers, including himself, have trod so often before. In a lengthy prologue, scientists worry about solar flares, neutrinos, rising core temperatures and shifting geological thingies and talking to the President (Danny Glover). By the time top-billed star John Cusack finally shows up, you’re likely to have forgotten he’s in it.

Cusack plays a published but unsuccessful novelist driving a limo in LA while his estranged wife (Amanda Peet) raises his children (Liam James and Morgan Lily) with her new boyfriend, a plastic surgeon (Tom McCarthy). On a camping trip with the kids at Yellowstone, he meets pirate radio broadcaster/conspiracy theorist Woody Harrelson who explains what’s about to go down just in time for the earthquakes and volcanoes to start. Harrelson, currently seen in the vastly more entertaining “**Zombieland**,” as always has a field day but he is hopelessly hamstrung by a humor-dyslexic director who wouldn’t know humor if he fell dead over it.

Chiwetel Ejiofor as a good guy scientist, Thandie Newton as the President’s beautiful daughter and Oliver Platt as a bad chief of staff (aren’t they always?) round out the cast. George Segal and unbilled Lance Hendrickson also appear.

Devoid of suspense, dramatic intensity and any humor whatsoever, the movie is just an exercise in visual excess.

The movie crosscuts between the powers that be trying to save the hides of the people who could pony up a billion Euros for a stateroom on a high tech ark and Cusack’s quest to save his own hide. The movie would have had more suspense if we didn’t know for a fact that there was a high level conspiracy before we even met the character whose function should have been to discover that for himself and the audience. Structurally the screenplay is a mess.

No good deed goes unpunished in this movie. Virtually every time a character behaves

selflessly or courageously in the face of danger, they die horribly. It actually gets depressing after awhile. The infrequent attempts at comic relief are leaden, lame and lackluster.

The movie exists for the special sequences, and they're dazzling. If you're going to see this, not that I actually recommend this for a second, see it in a theater, the biggest one you can find. On TV this thing is going to be an absolute waste of time. And don't go the restroom when Cusack is barreling across town in a limo to pick up his protesting wife and kids. The property damage that follows is the best thrill ride in the movie by a mile.

The problem even there is that there are so many repetitive scenes of computer-generated property damage that it gets a bit predictable. Land plane. Take off with bigger plane while runway crumbles behind it.

Emmerich's direction is ham-handedly obvious, especially with the cracks and crevices that always seem to divide people and things to suggest the problems with relationships. When he finally does this with the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel between God and Adam, groaning in pain is the only option. (That's followed, by the way, with a shot of the entire Basilica falling down and rolling over the faithful praying in St. Peter's Square.) Emmerich seems to actively dislike organized religion. When the little Buddhist monastery minding its own business on top of the Himalayas gets destroyed by a tidal wave I found myself lamenting a lost opportunity for irony. The monks could have gone on drinking their tea as the waves lapped just at their doorstep.

In any event, small children will find it frightening. Anyone who's seen a disaster movie before will find it predictable and cliché-ridden ("Save the puppy...!") People with weak bladders will find it too long. If there's any justice, Sony will find it unprofitable.