

Movie Review: I Am Legend

Written by {ga=mitch}

Monday, December 17 2007 7:00 PM -

The Mitch Man checks in with us again, this time to review "I Am Legend", starring Will Smith and no one else. And I mean no one else. The film is about a mutated man made virus that wipes out everyone on the planet except Smith, the military's chief viral expert, and the only survivor of the deadly virus becoming air born. In his review, Mitch says the Fresh Prince puts on an amazing performance in this one ... but what did he think of the film? Find out in his latest review for us here at TCF.



A One-Man show is, beyond doubt, the hardest performance to pull off. It is almost exclusively proprietary to the stage, as in biographical pieces such as Hal Holbrook portraying Mark Twain or Gabe Kaplan as Karl Marx, or in hour long rant type performances such as the ones that first made Eric Bogosian famous.

In movies? It almost never happens. Mostly due to the fact that movie audiences don't want to sit there for two hours having someone on the screen speaking directly to them the entire time.

So if you are to make a film that is a one-man show (or one where an actor is alone for most of the film), you better have three things. One is an actor of extreme talent who is also very bankable. The second is a script that can suffice on minimal speaking. And the third is a plot device to allow him to voice his thoughts when needed.

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All three are present in "I Am Legend", the first successful use of the One-Man Show device since Tom Hanks got lost on that island in "Cast Away".

Like that fine Robert Zemeckis film, there are other people scattered here and there throughout the film, giving some human interaction for the central character at the beginning and end...but the fate of the film rides on its main star, who must be charismatic enough to hold it together.

Will Smith cements his status as a mega-star in this apocalyptic action-adventure/horror sci-fi film. This is the third adaptation of the Richard Matheson novel, the first being Vincent Price in "The Last Man on Earth" in 1964 and the other being the Charlton Heston cult-classic "The Omega Man" in 1971. The Big Question is the same for all three: "If I were the last man alive, what would I do?"

As Dr. Robert Neville, Smith is the military's chief viral expert in charge of finding a cure for a mutated man made virus that is turning the entire planet into mindless vampire type creatures. It was supposed to be a cure for cancer, says the inventor (an uncredited cameo from Emma Thompson), but it mutated quickly and then became air born. Three years later, he is alone in one of the most surreal movie settings I've ever seen, an amazing portrayal of what Manhattan would look like after three years of total inactivity.

In flashbacks, we see how New York City became Ground Zero in the pandemic, with Neville struggling to get his family out of the city before it becomes quarantined. The images of those last days before disaster set in are the driving force in Neville's life, and why he stays there, continually working on the cure. As it turns out, he is one of the handful of people in the world that had a genetic immunity to the virus. A fortuitous coincidence, one would think. I personally thought it more realistic in "The Omega Man" where Neville had just discovered the cure when an accident made it so that the only person he could inoculate in time was himself.

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So Neville spends his days hunting food, looking for survivors, and continuing his research. Like Tom Hanks needing the volleyball "Wilson" to use as a prop to enable him to voice his thoughts, Neville has two methods for this; his German Shepherd companion Samantha, and also the video logs he dictates for prosperity's sake as he conducts his research.

During the days, you are struck by the total isolation that would eventually drive any man insane, and Smith does a great job showing how the edges are starting to fray. At night, it's a different mind-scaring scenario as Neville must bolt down his home in protection against the light sensitive mutants.

The mutants are portrayed much differently than the other two adaptations. In the Price film, they were slow moving zombie types. With Heston's movie, they were more intellectual, led by a former news broadcaster who is now their messianic leader. In this film, they are CGI rendered monsters blessed with near superhuman strength and speed, something more befitting a video game than a movie. And I feel the film suffers for it, as they are too unbelievable, and too mindless...just gimmicks for shock and awe scenes.

And that is something that fans of the Matheson novel will be disappointed with. In the book, the creatures represented a new order to deal with, in what was more of a social commentary than a horror story. Using the creatures as mere props dilutes the messages that could be sent had they stuck closer to the original.

However, in this case, the Star IS the film, and in the hands of any lesser actor, this movie could not succeed. Matt Damon? Too morose. Brad Pitt? Too lightweight. Russell Crowe? Too prickly to embrace for this long of a time alone. Johnny Depp? A great actor, but again, one a little too introverted to carry this off.

No, what was needed was someone with the ability to find some light moments of humor and therefore humanity in a man conversing with dogs and mannequins,

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while still being able to realistically show the audience his gradual slide into despair as things look more and more hopeless. This is not the type of role that normally leads to awards, but in this case it should...as it is the finest performance I've ever witnessed from Smith, even exceeding his work in "The Pursuit of Happiness" and "Ali";

"I Am Legend" is a perfect Summer Blockbuster being released during the Christmas holiday season. It has action and thrills to spare, unbelievable special effects, a taut script, and a superstar actor. You may find yourself nit picking the deficiencies an hour after you leave the theater, but you won't regret having seen it.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 Footballs)