

“THE DARKEST HOUR” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Friday, 23 December 2011 00:59



Early in THE DARKEST HOUR, best friends Sean (Emile Hirsch) and Ben (Max Minghella), newly arrived in Russia, discuss the possibility of hooking up with a cute American girl in a local bar. Scoffs Sean, “I could get that at Applebee’s”; clearly he welcomes exoticism, surprise and variety. The same could presumably be said for audiences watching a movie set and filmed on location in a city as unique as Moscow, but everything that happens in THE DARKEST HOUR is...well, let’s just say you could get that at Applebee’s.

Sean and Ben are in Russia to close the deal for a party-spot app they’ve created, only to find that their alleged business partner Skyler (Joel Kinnaman) has ripped them off. They’ve apparently put a lot of effort into their project but done nothing to protect their intellectual property, which makes them very stupid, and thus unlikely candidates to survive a catastrophic alien invasion. But survive it they do, along with aforementioned American girl Natalie (Olivia Thirlby), her Aussie pal Anne (Rachael Taylor) and Skyler, whom the boys shepherd into their hiding place despite not only his having cheated them, but having witnessed him pulling a serious dick move on his date in the midst of the chaos.



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To backtrack a bit: the extraterrestrials first descend from the night sky looking like something you might hang on a Christmas tree, or distant cousins of the falling fireballs in the similar, far superior *ATTACK THE BLOCK*, before turning invisible and wiping out their panicked human prey. (Question: Why don't they make themselves invisible *before* they descend? Wouldn't that add an element of surprise to their attack?) Though we and the characters can rarely see the invaders, we sometimes see what they see, i.e. the usual filtered point-of-view shots resembling those of a TSA airport screener, though the victims in *THE DARKEST HOUR* are subjected to much worse than an inappropriate pat-down. The aliens' preferred mode of deathdealing—violently reducing people to ashes—looks cool, but has been pretty well given away by all the trailers and TV spots.

Anyway, our fivesome hole up in their basement sanctuary for close to a week, a period swiftly dealt with in a quick montage that appears to have condensed all the scenes where the character development went. As they emerge onto the streets and seek safety, the youths remain ciphers running through a plot that doesn't much warrant further recounting, though it certainly wouldn't take very long. Essentially, they run from one brief safe haven to another, through a Moscow used for little more than picture-postcard backdrops, trading dialogue consisting alternately of pseudoscientific speculations on the nature of the aliens and how they might be defeated, and variations on “Come on, this way!” They do run into a few local survivors, but their foreignness isn't very meaningful given that they either speak English or there's someone there to translate for them, and their Russian dialogue is helpfully subtitled for us the viewers. Throughout, the 3D doesn't register too strongly since so much of the film is set in dimly lit environments; the dimensional highlight is the eye-catching opening-titles sequence.

Director Chris Gorak previously made the well-regarded, similarly themed though smaller-scaled *RIGHT AT YOUR DOOR*, which I haven't seen but still want to, and the screenplay is by Jon Spaihts, who also wrote (uh-oh) Ridley Scott's much-anticipated *PROMETHEUS*. To be fair, given that this is yet another film that seems to have left large chunks on the cutting-room floor (it runs just 89 minutes, of which around 10 are devoted to opening and closing credits), we might not be able to truly judge their work until a potential extended director's cut appears on disc. This may also allow us to better appreciate the actors, who certainly aren't seen to their best advantage here. Particularly ill-served is Thirlby, such a fresh, appealing presence in other movies, here stuck playing a girl who, after being knocked off a boat with her friends, doesn't follow them in swimming to safety but instead climbs onto land and flees half a mile into hostile territory. She's also the recipient of a text message that's *THE DARKEST HOUR*'s biggest howler, one that's almost worth sitting through the movie for...almost.



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