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THE IMPOSSIBLE

Juan Antonio Bayona's *The Impossible*, based on one family's experiences in the wake of 2004's horrific Asia tsunami, is a supremely well-designed, emotionally draining disaster tale, and its opening minutes filled me with great dread. If only that dread were caused by the approaching tsunami.

Alas, the movie's prelude put me on edge for entirely different reasons, most of them stemming from a fear that Bayona would prove entirely the wrong director for the material. *The Impossible* 's first scene introduces us to Maria (Naomi Watts), Henry (Ewan McGregor), and their three sons (Tom Holland's Lucas, Samuel Joslin's Thomas, and Oaklee Pendergast's Simon) – a British family currently residing in Japan, en route to Christmas vacation at a swank beachfront resort in Thailand. Despite some minor squabbling amongst the kids, and their parents' mildly edgy conversation involving a possibly unlocked door at home, the clan comes off as contented and comfortable. But there's an odd, airless quality to the film's initial sequence aboard the jet – Watts' and McGregor's dialogue sounds looped, and not terribly convincingly, during post-production – and after the family arrives at the resort, their exchanges with staffers and one another remain stilted, as though no one on-screen quite understood what was expected of them. You're left with the nagging suggestion that Bayona – a Barcelonian whose only previous feature was 2007's Spanish-language horror film
The Orphanage
– might not have proved the best fit for English-speaking performers, an idea reinforced when you discover, during the end credits, that the real-life family the film was inspired by is, in fact, Spanish. Would the early, apparent awkwardness have been alleviated if, instead of Watts and McGregor, the lead roles were assumed by Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem? (The whole movie, in general, is awfully white; though Bayona and screenwriter Sergio G. Sánchez clearly weren't trying for any kind of last word on the subject, the tsunami's destructive effect on the local, Asian population is barely addressed.)

Yet there are about 100 minutes of movie between *The Impossible*'s uneasy initial scenes and its finale, and those minutes are almost continually wrenching and consistently engaging. The tsunami, when it hits (and it hits
fast
), is rendered with such extraordinary visual and aural acuity that while you admire the technical feat behind its creation, there's really nothing traditionally, cinematically "thrilling" about the

moment; the gut-level feeling it inspires is less excitement than a nauseated, empathetic pain. It's one that continues, too, after Maria and Lucas are separated from the rest of their family – whom they presume to be dead – and washed away from the resort. Dislocated, frightened, and battered, with Maria experiencing enormous blood loss from a gash in her leg, the pair's struggles to stay alive and find dry land are presented by Bayona with harrowing, nearly excruciating realism, with Watts enacting her fiercely protective mom with a blazing intensity that's also, amazingly, remarkably subtle. (As for sixteen-year-old Holland, who's making his film debut, he feels slightly too practiced in his more demanding scenes, but is clearly a gifted performer, and oftentimes wonderfully touching.)

Hopefully, it won't be a spoiler to say that all five main characters survive, because the crux of the film's emotional involvement lies in our aching hope for the separated family members to somehow find one another, never more so than when a weeping Henry makes a desperate phone call to his parents. (One of modern movies' most heartbreaking male criers, McGregor delivers moments here that match his most anguished ones in *Moulin Rouge*.) Bayona, at times, isn't above blatant manipulation; you can feel him pushing for gushers of sobs at the sights of lost children, and reunited children, and children in general, and composer Fernando Velázquez's score is a bit too aggressively insistent. But with the tsunami's devastation so strikingly, sickeningly detailed, the escalating panic orchestrated with inspiring fluidity, and Watts and McGregor in top form, Bayona's offering is a tearjerker that truly earns the tears you shed – and trust me, there'll be
loads
of them.
The Impossible
is hardly a great time, but it's awfully close to a great movie.

PROMISED LAND

Hal Holbrook shows up as a crusty yet sage elder spokesman in Gus Van Sant's *Promised Land* , and it's
the sort of movie in which, somehow, you just
know
that Hal Holbrook is going to show up as a crusty yet sage elder spokesman. Written by

co-stars Matt Damon and John Krasinski, the movie is a not-so-veiled argument against the natural-gas drilling procedure known as fracking, telling of a corporate lackey (Damon) who finds his corporation's latest land acquisition threatened by the presence of an agitprop-spewing, anti-fracking environmentalist (Krasinski). Yet while Van Sant has a terrific eye for recognizable, small-town
mise en scène
, the film's clearly well-meaning authors – whose characters indulge in a few too many speeches that feel distractingly like capitalized Speeches – seem, here, to have ears of tin. Even the movie's more enjoyable diversions, such as the tentative romance that blossoms between Frances McDormand's levelheaded company worker and Titus Welliver's jaded store clerk, come off as unexceptional, B-plot necessities from Screenwriting 101, and several plot turns and relationships are irritatingly underdeveloped and ill-defined. (Rosemarie DeWitt, as the requisite hottie schoolteacher, gets chummy with Damon's company man
and
Krasinski's crusader, but we never learn how she met the latter, or whether their bond is or isn't platonic – which, in the scheme of the film, should kind of
matter
.) Still, with the performers underplaying nicely and Van Sant lending the material as much honesty as its clichés can bear,
Promised Land
is just pleasant enough to not be insulting ... unless, that is, you're a resident of Eldridge, Iowa, the hometown of Damon's character and, as he routinely says, the place where all his hopes for our agricultural future crashed and burned. He says it
nicely
, but I'm thinking it's hardly the big-screen recognition Eldridge residents might be hoping for.

TEXAS CHAINSAW

Near the beginning of the latest entry in the seemingly, unfortunately inexhaustible horror series featuring screen psychopath Leatherface, a mother tells her daughter, "Texas is the last place you want to be." For about an hour, you feel that she might as well have said, "*Texas Chainsaw* is the last place you want to be," because director John Luessenhop's ultra-gory (in 3D!) outing is just as poorly written, obviously staged, and lacking in true scares as any of the franchise installments that have come in the wake of Tobe Hooper's
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

from 1974. Yet while it might just be my wish to not start the new year's movie-going adventures on a
completely
hopeless note, I can't wholly disregard the movie. The viscera is impressively revolting and there are actually a few quasi-strong performances from the likes of Alexandra Daddario, Thom Barry, Tania Raymonde, and Clint's son Scott Eastwood, and those who meet the unfortunate end of Leatherface's buzzing weapon, in an amusing change, mostly
deserve
their fates. This is true of no one so much as the leering, malicious police officer played by Paul Rae, who treats Daddario's imperiled youth atrociously and pays for his sins by having his hands sawed clean off and sliding feet-first into a thresher.
Texas Chainsaw
was mostly the underwhelming shock-fest I expected. Leatherface's 2013 transformation into a chainsaw-wielding
hero
is something
no one
could have expected.

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