

No Rescue from These Flawed Films: "Proof of Life" and "Vertical Limit"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 13 December 2000 18:00

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PROOF OF LIFE

Proof of Life, the kidnapping drama by director Taylor Hackford, stars David Morse as Peter Bowman, an American engineer living near the Andes who gets abducted by a group of Latin American revolutionaries convinced that Bowman's dam-building project is an insidious political maneuver.

He's held for a ridiculous ransom, which Peter's wife Alice (Meg Ryan) can't possibly pay. Enter Terry Thorne (Russell Crowe), a hostage negotiator who, after initially refusing the assignment, eventually comes to Alice's aid, first hoping to get the pay-off down to a "reasonable" level, and then planning an elaborate rescue mission. While Peter suffers physical and spiritual torment at the hands of his abductors, Terry and Alice find themselves – naturally – falling for one another.

The problem is, you don't really feel the attraction between the leads (despite the actors' notorious off-screen fling), and even more damagingly, you don't feel the anguish of the kidnapped Peter. *Proof of Life* is inspired by a real-life case, and there's no doubt that months of imprisonment at the hands of madmen would be a horrifying situation for anyone; somewhat astonishingly, that horror never registers here. Hackford stages Peter's initial abduction well enough, but once Peter is in his enemies' hands, the movie goes slack. The Latin Americans keeping watch over him are seen as mostly incompetent and somewhat laughable (they engage in a lot of petty squabbling), and good actor though he is, David Morse isn't allowed any

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emotional progression in this role. He's given to fits of insouciance, happily flipping off his captors when given the chance; most of the time, he stares at them with a look that says, "How did this group of clods ever become kidnappers?" That's not necessarily a misguided character analysis – some abductees might very well use a sense of superiority to combat their terror – but it doesn't help a movie where the most logical tone would seem to be one of danger and impending death.

Maybe the filmmakers hedged on making the terror truly palpable because they were hoping that Crowe's and Ryan's near-romance would give off a comparable sizzle. If so, they were wrong. Ryan, who's in Serious Mode here (which means she smokes a lot), gives Crowe a few looks of mild curiosity that he reciprocates, and that's about as far as the sexual heat goes; both performers seem smart enough to know that a romance doesn't really belong in this movie, but the screenwriters are shoehorning them into one. Neither actor gives an embarrassing performance – Crowe has his sensational, audience-grabbing melancholy and Ryan does all she can with an unplayable role – but both characters are secondary to the story, and the story keeps trying to get out of their way.

There's not much filmmaking excitement on display (which is disappointing considering how lively Taylor Hackford's work was in his most recent film, the smashingly entertaining crap-classic *The Devil's Advocate*), but Hackford at least does well by a couple of supporting performers. The great Pamela Reed, who's been off-screen for a couple of years too many, gives strength and bite to her role as Alice's uptight sister-in-law (Ryan is at her best when partnering her), and David Caruso provides some tremendous line readings as Terry's assistant Dino, a true live wire who loves his job as a junior commando. His joshing scenes with Crowe are the most likable in the film; despite what could have been a great story and what should have been great chemistry between the leads, he's the film's one true

Proof of Life

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VERTICAL LIMIT

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In its trashy, obvious way, the natural-disaster action pic *Vertical Limit* is rather enjoyable, but the surprise is that the scenes that are the most fun have almost nothing to do with what (presumably) brought you to the cineplex in the first place – the promise of bitchin' avalanches and killer snowstorms. At the start, in fact, you may think you've mistakenly walked into a screening of *Mission:*

Impossible 2

; we're thrust into a Utah desert, where a group of rock-climbers attempt to scale a precipitous mesa and wind up almost literally hanging by a thread. Among the climbers are Peter (Chris O'Donnell) and Annie (Robin Tunney), a brother and sister who have to make an immediate life-or-death choice while on that mesa, and whose decision will haunt them forever. What's wonderful about this prologue, aside from the terrific stuntwork and clever staging by Martin Campbell, is that it fully establishes both the kinetic thrill and absolute terror of rock-climbing, and also gives emotional resonance (albeit clichéd emotional resonance) to the lead characters' plight. It's one of the jazziest intros the movies have given us this year.

It's also, unfortunately, the best scene in the movie, but you can have a pretty good time at *Vertical Limit*

nonetheless. While the plotting is nothing to shout about (Annie and a couple of co-climbers become entombed within K2, and it's up to her brother and a ragtag group of victims ... er, climbers, to rescue them), director Campbell gives the last hour of the film a fine sense of urgency, and stages several scenes with true visceral force: There's a marvelously tense moment when helicopter blades threaten to shred the rescue team at the start of their journey, and a few funny-and-scary scenarios involving containers of nitroglycerin, that the team learns – a little too late – tend to explode when introduced to sunlight. And although the effect is repeated a few times too often, the shots of climbers coming this close to tumbling off the mountain are good for a quick jolt (and are beautifully filmed). At its best,

Vertical Limit

gives you that giggly rush you only feel from an exquisitely rendered action scene, where you simultaneously cringe with apprehension and laugh at the filmmakers' chutzpah.

At its worst, the film resembles a bigger-budget version of '70s disaster tripe like *Avalanche*: stock characters (including Bill Paxton as a reckless billionaire and Scott Glenn in the craggly-old-climber role), lame dialogue, endless exposition, and some shockingly bad art direction. (Annie and her team get trapped in an underground catacomb that resembles nothing so much as an icy, Art Nouveau warehouse – it's Superman's Fortress of Solitude without visitations from Marlon Brando.) And the computer-generated snow effects aren't nearly as impressive as you'd like; they tend to minimize the danger rather than enhance it. Still,

Vertical Limit

is a more-than-passable time-waster, with a few scenes that any director would be proud to put his name on; believe it or not, the mindless action-flick format isn't dead quite yet.