

ENTERTAINMENT

Movie Review

Number One Film Really IS 'Sum of All Fears'

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Maybe it's just me.

Maybe I'm just losing interest in the whole Terrorists-Blow-Up-The-U.S. genre, the same way I've had my fill of serial killer/slasher flicks and David Fincher's brand of self-absorbed nihilism.

Who needs it? That's the world we live in already.

Show me something different when I go to the movies. I can turn on the nightly news at home.

Last weekend's big new release, "The Sum of All Fears," is a good movie; its craft is impeccable and it gets everything just about right, on a technical level. Whatever objections I have – and they are many – are really just quibbles and questions of personal taste.

"... Fears," the latest installment in Tom Clancy's "Jack Ryan" series, is good, solid escapist entertainment ... except that post-9/11 and pre-India/Pakistan, it wasn't escapist for this reporter.

It was creepy and uncomfortable, and I didn't seem to be the only one in the theater who felt that way.

Unfortunately for this film, movies do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they have a cultural context relative to the time and place in which they were created and released. Look at any film produced in the

early '40s or the late '60s and tell me that isn't the case.

Therefore, I think for a Blowin'-Up-America movie to work now, said flick would have to be about more than the constant specter, and the occasional spectacle of terrorist activity.

My nerves are already raw with the specter and spectacle of terrorism.

No, a terrorist movie today would have to have a larger aim, a grander goal than just showing stuff blowing up real cool.

Ten years ago, Jim Cameron's "Terminator 2" featured images of American cities being reduced to rubble by nuclear holocaust, but its importance to that film's theme about the triumph of hope over despair gave it dramatic impact, and made it more than just sensational effects work.

This story, though infinitely more complicated and tough for even some reviewers to follow, is strictly a formula affair.

If you haven't read the book, you're gonna be lost, and if you have the read the book, you're going to be disappointed.

The first 20 minutes are frontloaded with lots of weighty portent and convoluted plot machinations. Where's Basil Exposition when you need him?

Near as I can figure, the plot goes something like this: Boy finds bomb. Boy loses

bomb. Bomb goes boom. Mucho bad guy tail is kicked. Roll credits.

If you've seen the TV commercial, believe me, you've seen the movie. It shows exactly what's going to happen, where and to whom.

The only question it doesn't answer is 'why.'

Director Phil Alden Robinson, writer/director of 1987's "The Woo Woo Kid," as well as the Kevin Costner chestnut, "Field of Dreams," seems to have set out to reboot the series from scratch.

It's regrettable the filmmakers didn't choose to follow the character and story thread established in the previous three films ("Hunt For Red October," "Patriot Games" and "Clear And Present Danger"), but when Harrison Ford passed on doing this film, apparently they couldn't find any actors in Hollywood over 30 to take on the role.

So the all new, younger Jack Ryan is played by B-List pretty boy Ben Affleck, this generation's answer to Troy Donahue.

In spite of just not being Harrison Ford – he's not even Alec Baldwin, the role's big-screen originator – since Affleck isn't called upon to play cocky, his work here is bearable to the point of being not actively irritating.

In the same regrettable fashion, the always-fabulous Willem Dafoe wasn't asked to return as Agent Clark; instead we get the

serviceable, though still wet behind the ears Liev Schreiber.

And Morgan Freeman turns in a warm performance as CIA Director Bill Cabot, but James Earl Jones is sorely missed.

The movie's flaws don't end with its unnecessary downcasting, either.

I knew the film was in trouble early on, when the camera slow-zoomed in on the back of the lead villain's watch to reveal a scratched-in swastika.

What the ... Nazis? What is this, Tom Clancy or "The Boys From Brazil?"

In the Clancy book this film is based on, the villains were a small splinter group of Muslim fanatics. Sound familiar?

Chalk it up to another case of reactionary capitulation by the weak-kneed policy makers in Hollywood – in spite of their obvious fear of Clancy's reputation as a militaristic crank, at least his plots are feasible.

In this case, perhaps, the plot was all too feasible.

Which is why, when it comes right down to it, I guess I just don't find nuclear bomb plots entertaining any longer. Or whole cities being blown up by terrorists.

By extraterrestrials with zap-rays, maybe. But not by people with bombs. Not any more.

This is not a totally lousy movie, but it's ruined by a terminal case of bad timing.