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Review



FEARnet Movie Review: 'Hell'

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Monday, August 20, 2012 - 4:00pm

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From the Executive Producer of *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow*!, exclaims the trailer for the apocalyptic German horror film *Hell*, which might sound pretty enticing to the marketing executives, but to the movie fans it poses a question that sounds a bit like this: "What the hell does Roland Emmerich know about horror films? Horrible films, sure. But horror?" (At least that's how my brain sounds.) But it's not entirely fair to judge a sparse, odd, low-budget horror flick on the man who signs the checks and lends his name to the press notes; lots of directors, good and bad, have done their part to support younger filmmakers while still making a few bucks of their own, so why shouldn't Roland Emmerich get a turn?

Fortunately it looks like Mr. Emmerich backed some young filmmakers with talent, because what *Hell* lacks in originality, it makes up for in gritty intensity, strong performances, and a visual presentation that's both a workout for the eyeballs, but also strangely beautiful to look at. The setting, you see, is a few years from now, and most of humanity has been wiped out by solar flares, excessive heat, and a climate that is now ten degrees hotter than we're used to. It's an interesting hook: most post-apocalyptic thrillers tend to focus, at least partially, on how the world ended and who is to blame, but *Hell* simply drops us into a world that is dying a slow and very sweaty death.

Our central character is a young woman named Marie. She's on the road with her little sister and her boyfriend when they strike a tenuous relationship with another young guy ... and then bang, a roadblock leads to an ambush, and Marie's little sister is gone. Turns out she's been kidnapped by a feral group of survivors who claim other people as food -- unless they're young women. In a world gone wild, young women have a certain "value" over starving men and old ladies, and (of course) it's only a matter of time before Marie hatches a plan to get her sister back. For their part, the men are of little help. The formerly commanding Philip has gone missing, and newcomer Tom is plainly more of the selfish sort.

The small cast is strong across the board, although lead actress Hannah Herzprung stands out as a small glimmer of humanity in an otherwise brutal landscape. Director Tim Fehlbaum and his pair of co-writers earn marks for avoiding the most basic horror tropes: the film is not interested in overt gore or gruesome murders (the most chilling dispatch is presented in an oddly disturbing fashion), and while *Hell* often feels like a mash-up of *The Road* and virtually any post-apocalyptic drama you can imagine, it's also elevated by a very brisk pace, a frantic editorial approach that draws one in to even the drier moments, and (again) the bleached-out, hyper-saturated cinematography of the piece. Markus Forderer's almost-blinding approach to sunlight would be an instant eyesore in most movies, but presented as part of this film's particular style and setting, it's really rather cool.

If you're looking for end-of-the-world action or crazy cannibal carnage, you'll need to keep searching, but for those who wouldn't mind a short, sharp shock of downbeat but compelling apocalypse fiction, one that covers familiar ground but does so quickly and with some degree of novelty, *Hell* works more than well enough.