World Trade Center

Talent: Nicolas Cage, Michael Pena, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Maria Bello, Anthony Piccininni, Jude Ciccolella.

Director: Oliver Stone
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 125 minutes
We rate it: 3 and a half stars

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Oliver Stone’s most recent film before this one was the wannabe-epic and Colin Farrell vehicle Alexander. That film, which played worldwide to choruses of raucous laughter, has gone down in recent history as one of the most costly and ill-advised flops of the new millennium. It is fascinating, then, to see Stone follow that disastrous misfire up with an altogether different beast: an observant and powerfully-made film about one of our generation’s defining real-life tragedies, the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.

World Trade Center is a film that aims to be as stark and evocative as its three-word title; impressively, for the most part, it succeeds. Stone has taken as the subject of the film the harrowing and ultimately uplifting story of two Port Dock Authority policemen (played by Nicolas Cage and Michael Pena) who entered one of the crippled towers in the World Trade Center after the planes had hit it. No sooner had these brave men entered the building that it collapsed, killing most of the trapped office-workers and crushing the two men beneath thousands of tones of rubble. Astonishingly, many hours later, following the efforts of unimaginably brave and determined rescuers, the two men were dragged free.

Like Paul Greengrass, whose recent film United 93 was so powerful and non-didactic, Stone has tried to avoid overt flag-waving, patriotism or sentimentality. While Greengrass manages to stay just that little bit more objective, Stone nonetheless acquits himself well, and for much of its length keeps World Trade Center a restrained and affecting piece. For the director of such overtly “opinionated” films as Platoon and JFK to do this is an achievement in and of itself, and it shows how determined Stone must have been, after the black mark that was Alexander, to show the world that he is still capable of producing intelligent and dramatically charged cinema.
The performances of Cage and Pena really are outstanding, especially considering the fact that for much of the film’s running time the two actors are rigidly pinned into unyielding, claustrophobia-inducing spaces and speak their lines from under coatings of dust and rubble. There are back-stories, of course, and the film cuts between the trapped men and their distraught families who are elsewhere in the city, trying to establish their loved-ones’ status. To tell this tale, whose immediate ending we already know, and to tell it in so affecting and effective a way, is quite an achievement on Stone’s part. Harrowing it is (and a tad sentimental toward the end), but World Trade Center is a powerful, and powerfully told, story of courage and determination.

Nick Prescott