



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Poseidon

Talent: Kurt Russell, Richard Dreyfuss, Josh Lucas, Emmy Rossum, Jacinda Barrett.

Date of review: 15th June, 2006

Writer/director/editor: Wolfgang Petersen

Classification: M (Mature)

Duration: 99 minutes

We rate it: Two stars.

Well, it's remake time again. For quite a few years now people have been suggesting that Hollywood's major studios have run out of ideas; casting our minds back over the last little while, we will remember any number of re-jiggings, re-imaginings, updatings and re-creations. We have seen King Kong receive the Peter Jackson treatment, we've seen The Manchurian Candidate refashioned for the Gulf War generation, we've witnessed Charlie's Angels in its crass new incarnations, and we've seen The Fast and the Furious, The Mummy and Ocean's Eleven all remade and sequel-ised for modern cinemagoers.

In the case of Poseidon, the original film was called The Poseidon Adventure, and was directed by British filmmaker Ronald Neame in 1972. Big, suspenseful, and a smash hit in its day, the film was an entry in the 1970s cycle of "disaster films" which included The Towering Inferno, Airport and Earthquake. The Poseidon Adventure was set over the course of one fateful night on the ocean, and depicted the freak capsizing of an enormous cruise liner and the frantic attempts of a group of passengers to make their way through the bowels of the upturned ship to reach the surface before they ran out of oxygen. The terrific cast included a wonderfully charismatic Gene Hackman and the ever-reliable Ernest Borgnine, and had great supporting players including Roddy McDowall and Shelly Winters. The original thus represents a fairly large pair of shoes for any studio to attempt to fill with a remake.

The new version, simply entitled Poseidon, has been directed by German filmmaker Wolfgang Petersen, who has worked very successfully in Hollywood for a number of years. No stranger to "disaster" films himself, Petersen had one of his finest moments with the terrifying thriller Outbreak (1995), a film that dealt with an out-of-control virus and its devastating effects upon mainland America. Like many of its director's films, Outbreak was at times overly melodramatic, but it was made with such technical proficiency and moved with such breathtaking speed and intensity that you forgot all about realism and stayed pinned to the edge of your seat. Clearly, this is the effect the studio wanted to generate with Poseidon. Unfortunately, however, instead

of riveting suspense, for the most part Poseidon gives us godawful dialogue and unintentional laughs.

Petersen's technical proficiency, however, is still visible for all to see. The early sequences establishing Poseidon's characters and setting are polished and assured, with Australian cinematographer John Seale contributing beautifully lit images as glossy Hollywood eye-candy. When the "rogue wave" (a sort of spontaneous tidal wave out in the middle of the ocean) hits the ship, Petersen thrusts us right into the chilling midst of it, with convincing digital effects seamlessly woven into the live-action shots of mayhem and panic. The five or six minutes of screen time during which the capsizing is depicted is eerily believable and genuinely frightening.

After that, however, things turn decidedly silly. Petersen is a director who can put together a breathtaking action sequence, but he seems to flounder when working with actors who are not secure in their screen personae. Thus, the scenes in Poseidon with the wonderful Richard Dreyfuss work quite well, but many of the younger cast members come off looking quite silly in their scenes, with over-the-top earnestness provoking groans from the audience. A further example of the film's hilarious dramatic ineptitude comes in the form of a supporting character played by Kevin Dillon, who seems to have been written as a kind of villain, but whose idiotic dialogue and preposterous behaviour render him a laughing stock. His spectacular demise provides one of the funniest moments in this utterly straight-faced picture.

In all, Poseidon is an extraordinarily expensive piece of unintentional camp. Beautifully visualised but appallingly written, Petersen's film needed a writer like David Mamet to endow it with some literary credibility. I doubt they offered it to him, but I imagine Mamet would have turned it down anyway. If it ain't broke, I can hear him saying...

Nick Prescott.