

Godzilla: Smashing Looks, Not Great Personality

Grab the popcorn, you courageous moviegoers, and go take in your summer dose of mayhem, death, and destruction. The newest Godzilla movie hits theaters packing a big budget, noteworthy cast list, and giant special effects that recapture much of the classic aura of the original Japanese film so far as this young viewer can tell.

The movie opens with the discovery of a mysterious creature beneath a Philippine mine. It escapes to Japan where, unknown to the engineers, it causes the collapse of a nuclear power plant facility. During his investigation of earth tremors, scientist Joe Brody (Bryan Cranston) loses his wife in the disaster as he witnesses evidence that this was no natural occurrence.

Fast forward fifteen years, and Brody has developed an obsession to find the source of this accident and somehow cover his guilt for sending his wife to investigate on the day of the nuclear catastrophe. We meet Brody's son Ford, a military explosive disposal specialist who juggles married life, fatherhood, and an overseas military career while he buries his memories of the past, unlike his father. When dad gets arrested in Japan for trespassing in the quarantine zone looking for answers, Ford goes overseas to bail him out, and before long they go back in, recover some lost data, and get wrapped up with the secret organization that tracks monsters like Godzilla.

At the reactor site lies a mantis-like Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism or MUTO that survives on radiation. The monster awakes, things don't go well, and the primordial terror gets away. This isn't the only one, though. Scientists discover that the other MUTO originally discovered survived vivisection and is on the loose in Nevada and that the two are seeking each other. Throw in Godzilla to the mix, who ultimately saves the day even as the military goes all-out to track and destroy all three monsters themselves.

The film naturally relies on CGI effects, but this aspect surprisingly wasn't too gratuitous given the genre of the film until the very last knock-down fight in San Francisco. Then the smashing of enormous buildings in a gloomy, smoke-ridden city seemed a little bit excessive, like an intensified version of J.J. Abram's destruction of the city in *Star Trek: Into Darkness* last summer. The MUTOs' EMP emissions made things difficult for military strategy, and the chase strategy was intriguing, though the scenes of sheer destruction broke up the pacing of those efforts.

What the story did seem to lack were strong emotional ties or standout character performances overall. Bryan Cranston did give an over-the-top dramatic performance at the beginning of the film, which stands out against Ken Watanabe's quiet and dismayed scientist. Cranston's character has limited influence though, while Watanabe's lingers and mutters comments about man's limitations and Godzilla restoring some sort of balance to nature. I'm still trying to figure out exactly why the filmmakers thought he should have a sidekick scientist along for the ride. Ford and Elle Brody (Elizabeth Olsen), the main couple in the film, don't have any outstanding flaws, but I found their characters somewhat flat and hard to take seriously. The cast chemistry really doesn't matter in the end though, since it's the monsters that really leave the biggest impact.

I'm personally not a fan of this monster-apocalypse genre. In a way, I feel claustrophobic amidst such grim destruction without a real human element to hold on to. That said, I think the film does a decent job at what it intends and recaptures much of what I remember about the 1954 film, though I would have appreciated more warm-fuzzies when the earth is saved and the credits roll.

