

Hollywood adage crumbles in movie disasters

By Greg Lukow

You've got to give Irwin Allen credit. There's a Hollywood adage about good movie making; something about giving it class, a lot of stars, and doing whatever it takes to do it right.

Allen, producer and action-sequence director of that multi-million dollar movie pyre, **The Towering Inferno**, at least comes close. When compared with the other two recent disaster releases, **Earthquake** and **Airport 1975**, his picture looms high above. But not far enough to keep me from talking about them all together and getting the silly things out of the way.

Plot minimal

Airport 1975's plot is minimal: small aircraft pilot has heart attack (we'll run across a lot of them) and flies head-on into huge jetliner; hysterical stewardess, Karen Black, takes over controls, and all aboard are saved only after some ticklish mid-air heroics by gritty Charlton Heston. This plastic movie is one big yawn with the only real interest coming from picking out all the stars and a myriad of other not so famous names but instantly recognizable faces.

George Kennedy plays the worrisome airline executive (his wife and son are on board, naturally); Gloria Swanson plays herself, gabbing endlessly about past glories and the old days with Cecil B. De Mille (now there's someone who really knew how to make this kind of schlock); Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. as the bleeding, groaning pilot; Linda Blair (of **The Exorcist** fame), playing the effervescent teenager desperately in need of a kidney transplant yet always keeping a smile on her face (I liked her better with scabs); and a homely Helen Reddy in an amazingly embarrassing Gosh-I'm-making-my-first-movie-isn't-this-a-lot-of-fun role as a singing nun (now that's an original idea).

But what good are name actors when their only purpose is to fill stereotyped spaces that don't even make good bit parts? Their dialogue is limited to things like "We're all going to die!" and other little squeaks in the background. They don't do anything so there can't be any chemistry between them, something we should expect from any star-studded cast worth its salt. They're only wooden pegs, effortlessly sitting in their allotted round voids.

Effects laughable

As bad as all this is, the technical effects are just as

laughable. Some completely uncalled-for shakey camera work looks like the crew was still making **Earthquake** (Universal produced both pictures and, although it was released later, **Earthquake** was actually filmed first). Unbelievably bad matte shots make the plane look like it is flying high above the clouds one moment and 100 feet off the ground the next.

Airport 1975 is a shambles, the ultimate example of how thrilling boredom can be. What's frustrating isn't that the producers offer up this kind of entertainment for the masses, but that they should do it in such a cheap, empty way, throwing out bad scripts, empty-headed directing (Jack Smight, for what it's worth) and fudging on every moviemaking tradition. I've seen TV movies 10 times better.

Earthquake, the ultimate in epic movie masochism, has an even more blatantly melodramatic story line than **Airport 1975**, but it is saved by some monumental, if hokey, special effects that bring about the leveling of Los Angeles, and, of course, by that headache-inducing demonstration of woofer power, Sensurround. If nothing else it will satisfy your curiosity and if a person's in the right mood it can be a fun movie. At the showing I attended everyone was quietly laughing and talking among themselves (you could yell among yourselves during the quake scenes and not bother anyone) and at least semi-enjoying all the campiness. Somehow these little sidelights slip the movie into that it's-so-bad-it's-good category, as opposed to **Airport 1975**, which is so bad it's really bad.

Filling space

Heston and Kennedy are once again filling in spaces in this one. Ava Gardner and Lloyd Nolan are the token old movie stars. Ava plays Heston's rich-bitch wife who can't live civilly with him but is outraged by the fact that he's seeing a much more appealing Genevieve Bujold on the sly. Lorne Greene, Heston's boss, plays the kindly business executive who suffers the token heart attack; and Marjoe Gortnor is a psychopathic gun-nut who adds the sourest note to the movie. There are others, but you get the idea.

Bujold deserves hearty plaudits for putting up with the biggest set of hair-raising predicaments since Pearl

White panicked her way through the silent serials. I was surprised, however, that the producers missed a great exploitation opportunity by putting slacks on her instead of a short dress. All that climbing and everything... (remember Carol Lynley in **The Poseidon Adventure**?)

The special effects here get the job done, mostly in miniature (including a 50-foot-wide dam break filmed in slow motion). As for Sensurround, for the first half minute it's exciting; after 10 minutes it is overbearing.

Smattering of class

Which brings us to **The Towering Inferno**, that 135-story high glass deathtrap produced by Allen under a joint collaboration of Warner Bros. and 20th Century Fox. Like the other two disaster pictures, this one has its share of dumb moments, but like its predecessor **The Poseidon Adventure** (another Allen idea), it has a smattering of class amid all those stereotypes and crusty cliches. It has real stars like Newman, McQueen and Faye Dunaway. It has Fred Astaire dancing with Jennifer Jones. It at least gives us a small dose of insight into some of the characters; when they're sacrificed we've come to know them just enough to feel a small pang of regret.

The film also has some impressive special effects; we know how it's done but it looks good anyway. It's a much longer movie but doesn't waste nearly as much of our time. It has 50% more cliff-hanging moments and 90% less of those incredulous "Oh my Gods!" spoken by bug-eyed, gaping stars in the other two pictures. All in all it makes **Earthquake** and **Airport 1975** look like home movies in comparison.

But it has its choice moments too including a lot of dumb-dumb lines and a fire that takes all day to break out of a storeroom and then has an amazing knack of skipping a dozen floors at a time on its ever upward ascent. There's one precious moment at the film's end when a fat woman suffers the movie's (you guessed it) token heart attack. The ambulance men are unprofessional but kind hearted enough to hold back clapping the oxygen mask on her so she can gasp out a few encouraging words to a friend.

So much for disaster movies. Until some long dormant volcano suddenly pops up in the middle of Flagstaff, Arizona, I hope that's the end of them.

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