Disaster for Dummies

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Global warming makes for apolitical hot potato and one hell of a lousy summer movie

*The Day After Tomorrow*

Dennis Quaid, Jake Gyllenhaal, Emmy Rossum, Sela Ward

Directed and co-written by Roland Emmerich

DISASTER-MOVIE JUNKIES may snap-freeze their brains at *The Day After Tomorrow* just to see what a $125 million budget and an army of computers can do to show the horrors of global warming: The Big Apple is invaded by a tidal wave that nearly drowns Lady Liberty. The HOLLYWOOD sign goes down in a tornado. Hailstorms pound Tokyo. Hurricanes whack Hawaii. Way cool? Not to these eyes. Except for a Russian freighter floating down Fifth Avenue - neat shot - it all looks synthetic, like something untouched by a human hand or heart. The only truly scary thing about this doomsday popcorn flick is the monumental ineptitude of the acting, writing and directing. Yet the movie has become a lightning rod for political debate. The right dismisses it as fright propaganda that posits the onset of a new ice age in a few days, when in reality that would take decades. The left embraces it as a chance to raise consciousness about greenhouse gases and bash George Bush for not taking action.

Did they see the same block' headed cheeseball movie that I saw? The one in which climatologist Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) leaves snowed-in D.C. - where he scolds the foot-dragging vice president, a real Cheney-esque dick in the performance of Ken Welsh - to embark on a mission: Jack must rescue his seventeen-year-old son, Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal), who is holed up with his buds in the New York Public Library burning books for warmth.

You got it, folks. Director Roland Emmerich and his co-screenwriter, Jeffrey Nachmanoff, have lifted the plot of Finding Nemo, only this time it's far more cartoonish. Jack leaves behind his doctor wife, Lucy (Sela Ward), who suffers nobly in the hope that global warming can save their troubled marriage before it ends them. As for Sam, played by the usually capable Gyllenhaal like aguppy wimp, he flirts timidly with Laura (Emmy Rossum, so confident in Mystic River, so flailing here) but makes it clear that his true love is for Jack, the workaholic dad who never had time for him.

Kill me now. The avalanche of cliches just won't quit. There's a homeless black man in the library with a cute dog who barks whenever calamity approaches. Sadly, the mutt doesn't bowwow when a new chunk of dog dialogue is about to be spoken. Quaid gets the lion's share of clinkers. "Unpack the snowshoes, we're walking from here," says Jack when his car conks out in Philly and he and his team begin the trudge to Manhattan.

The film's career-threatening performances must be blamed on Emmerich, who brings out the worst in actors - see Godzilla making them gaze into the camera for close-ups meant to resonate with feeling when it's clear they are staring open-mouthed into a blank screen on which special effects will be projected later. You can't blame Emmerich for recycling many of the effects that worked in his biggest hit, Independence Day, but his disregard for even the flimsiest logic turns the film into an unintentional campfest. First we see the steel girders of Manhattan freeze over and snap. Then we cut to Sam and Laura sharing a smooch in the library, where one fireplace and their love are apparently sizzling enough to ward off the latest ice age. Don't ask whether or not you should take *The Day After Tomorrow* seriously. Don't take it at all.

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