

Skyscraper doesn't catch fire

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of ««««

Running Time: 102 minutes

It's unfortunate that even when an original movie arrives in theaters, its inspirations are so blatant that it hardly feels like anything new or original. Such is the case with Skyscraper, a summer film that purposefully attempts to fuse disaster movie fare like The Towering Inferno with the bombastic action of Die Hard. Its star is likable and the film does the best it can to try and entertain, but never builds tension or amounts to much when all is said and done.

The plot follows a former FBI agent named Will Sawyer (Dwayne Johnson). Now heading a security systems company, old friend (Pablo Schreiber) gets him an interview in Hong Kong with Zhao Long Ji (Chin Han) to assess his new skyscraper. It's a massive, 250-ish story high-rise that dwarfs even the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Of course, mere minutes after the business meeting moves locations, an armed team arrive. Led by a malevolent gunman (Roland Moller), they set the building on fire. Will is framed for the crime and forced to not only evade authorities and stop the bad guys, but break into the skyscraper to help his wife Sarah (Neve Campbell) and children (McKenna Roberts and Noah Cottrell), who are trapped in the tower above the fire.

It's all just an excuse to have hero Will hang perilously from precarious heights hundreds of stories in the air. Admittedly, the movie does a reasonable job creating some vertigo from the daunting height of the structure as the lead is forced to climb a crane and leap into the burning building. Another scene later in the picture involves the protagonist using his artificial leg to keep from falling off the building. These kinds of moments work reasonably well once or twice, but by the fourth or fifth time lose their impact.

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The fights between the hero and villains are well staged, but the movie even pulls its punches here as well. If you've seen an old-fashioned disaster or action movie, they can be quite, well, bloodthirsty. Often, characters meet exaggerated and elaborate ends and often save an especially over-the-top end for its main heavy. This title is remarkably tame by comparison. There aren't many victims to endanger since the building is essentially empty. As for the villains, they are often dispatched off-screen or without much fanfare.

These elements wouldn't matter so much if the characters were sharply written, but that isn't the case. The script hopes to get by solely on its star's charisma and not the dialogue. Co-star Noah Taylor is a great performer given nothing to work with and the villains are about as one note as it gets. An action film is only as good as its baddies, but the dialogue is little more than exposition explaining what is happening. Things become even more incredulous after the introduction of the Hong Kong police authorities (Byron Mann and Elfina Luk). They spend most of the movie looking clueless and having strategies fed to them by Will and Sarah.

And that's a big part of the problem. The Will character is written as an amputee who has long given up his previous life as part of a tactical unit. Yet he and his military physician wife are so skilled and accomplished that taking out the bad guys seems only moderately more difficult than preparing and cooking dinner. In the end, it's all too easy and the approach drains much of the excitement from the proceedings.

Large sections of the movie involve a huge crowd watching Will cling to the building on a television monitor. Naturally, they cheer him on (even though news reports have previously stated that he might be the person responsible for the fire). It's as though they've seen all of this before as well and can predict exactly what is coming every step of the way. And so will most viewers who go to see Skyscraper. Despite the lead and elaborate scenario, things never end up really catching fire.

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