

'The Midnight Sky' is a grimly intriguing sci-fi drama

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Thursday, 24 December 2020 10:40



Rating: <<<< *out of* <<<<<

Running Time: 122 minutes

This film will be available on Netflix to stream on Dec. 23.

When reviewing movies, some critics try to avoid discussing the film with others after seeing it. This is done to have an honest reaction to the feature and avoid being influenced by outside opinions. Sometimes it can be a difficult task, particularly during awards season. I'm part of a group who hands out awards and while 2020 has provided some distance, we all still canvas and drum up support for our personal favorites.

But sometimes films provoke unexpectedly extreme responses.

Such is the case with *The Midnight Sky*, which garnered a surprising amount of disdain from my own group. I would agree that it's not a major Oscar contender, but for this reviewer it's still a somber, but effective science-fiction yarn.

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As the story begins, the planet is in the process of undergoing a major, world-ending disaster and viewers are seeing the last human survivors in the Arctic. With the inexorable end heading toward them, those at a research station leave for a sanctuary site they hope will keep them alive. However, one man named Augustine Lofthouse (George Clooney) insists on staying put. He wants to relay a message to astronauts heading back to Earth after a space colonization mission.

His goal is to tell them not to come home, but he faces an additional problem when he discovers a mute child (Caoilinn Springall) who hid away during the final evacuation. Meanwhile, returning astronauts Sully Rembshire (Felicity Jones), Gordon Adewole (David Oyelowo) and the rest of the crew (Tiffany Boone, Demian Bichir, Kyle Chandler) try to make sense of the lack of communication from Earth.

There’s a lot going on in this film and admittedly not all of it works. The story begins by introducing a hopeless scenario and chooses to focus on the characters and their responses to tragedy, rather than solving the problem. Lofthouse has his own agenda that is slowly revealed over the narrative, while the concerned astronauts must deal with their own calamities. And of course, even if the explorers do manage to make it home alive, they’ll be forced to deal with the horrors of what they will be returning to.

It’s gloomy stuff, but the concept does provide viewers with plenty of existential drama and ruminations over life and how to face its potential end.

Clooney, who also directed the feature, has a meaty part as a loner determined to get his message out. He may be the grouchiest and least personable character in the movie, but also stands as the most relatable. As for the astronauts, some of the decisions made by the crew are eccentric and for a couple of individuals late in the film, even questionable. However, even if some comments are not what one might anticipate, it is interesting to see a variety of responses from individuals and may even provoke conversation between viewers about how each of us might deal with similar events.

Yet the story isn’t exclusively about the psychological states of the characters. Whenever it does begin to become too ponderous, the film reverts to delivering a few thrills. There is a grandiose scene set in orbit that will probably remind viewers of another Oscar-winning space movie from a few years back. Naturally, this sequence isn’t nearly as powerful (it also doesn’t help that one will likely be watching it on a small screen).

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Still, it is effective and filled with appropriate tension. There is also a lengthy bit involving Lofthouse and the child dealing with breaking ice that may stand as the feature's most taut and chilling. In general, the tech skills on display are excellent and the movie looks great.

Some of the drama onboard the spacecraft is awkward at times and the ending may not elicit a big emotional response, but the movie is interesting and provocative. So why would a significant group of reviewers be so annoyed by this film? If I were to guess, it may have to do with the fact that for all of the heroes present on the spacecraft and in the Arctic, they can't do much to stop the inevitable. And as a result, perhaps these characters don't come across as pro-active enough and the movie is too focused on their personal regrets and inner struggles.

But while *The Midnight Sky* may have some rough patches and be a bit dark for the holiday season, it still stands as an absorbingly different effort for sci-fi fans.

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