

'Army of the Dead' is a case of undead style over substance

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 148 minutes

This film became available to viewers May 21 on Netflix.

Filmmaker Zach Snyder has spent the last decade producing and directing superhero films based on the sprawling DC comic book universe. However, he actually got his big break in 2004 helping a remake of the horror classic, *Dawn of the Dead*. Snyder has now returned to the zombie genre with *Army of the Dead*. His latest boasts plenty of gore and wild action, but it also requires viewers to overlook nonsensical story elements and tonal inconsistencies.

The story is set in the city of Las Vegas, Nev. After a massive zombie outbreak results in the famous strip and surrounding area being walled off from the rest of the country. The government considers dropping a nuclear weapon on the infested area. Scott Ward (Dave Bautista), a man who survived the initial undead assault, is hired by casino owner Bly Tanaka

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(Hiroyuki Sanada) to assemble a team of mercenaries to conduct a secret operation. The plan is for this small group to gain access to Tanaka's casino vault and recover \$200 million dollars on site before the entire area is decimated by the bomb.

But of course, Tanaka may have an ulterior motive for sending the group inside and Scott must contend with his estranged daughter Kate (Ella Purnell), who insists on joining the mission.

Adding a break-in heist element to a zombie picture is an intriguing twist on the horror formula and the setting of Las Vegas makes for a colorful and visually arresting backdrop. As movie fans will already know, the director has a distinct style and has been shooting big action set pieces for years, meaning that the chases and gunfights involving zombies are all punchy and amusing to watch. The opening scene and climax detailing a lengthy attack involving hundreds of monsters does contain thrills and chills.

If only the characters were more fully drawn. This might seem a surprising thing to complain about given the film's extended two-and-a-half hour running time. Lead Bautista is a likable hero who tries to eke some drama out of a personal trauma involving a family member. However, the script doesn't seem nearly as interested in anything concerning his backstory.

The protagonist's struggles with daughter Kate are underdeveloped and she isn't there to do more than roll her eyes and fight with those around her. As for the group of soldiers, they aren't given more than a basic trait and the opportunity for posturing. At least co-star Tig Notaro makes an impression as a wise chopper pilot who comments on the ridiculousness of the situation (a couple of these notes seem improvised).

These flaws might be forgivable if the film was clever or offered satire to balance its extravagances. Sadly, the story doesn't make sense and there are bizarre editing choices and tonal imbalances. The film opens with an extended montage presenting the original zombie rampage and the protagonist's history. It is choppily assembled and generally played for laughs with gory sight gags that unintentionally diminish any personal trauma for the leads to address later in the film.

Many of the leads make doozy decisions, or assert an idea before embarking on contradictory moves later in the story.

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There are even problems with the zombies themselves. We discover that some possess human emotions like rage, can move quickly and act more intelligently than other undead folk. Yet the details and reasons why aren't explained in nearly enough detail, nor is much done with their extra gifts. And even the casino owner's true motivations for the operation leave viewers wondering why he went through with this elaborate ruse and didn't use his resources in a simpler and more direct manner.

In the end, this picture's wild and over-the-top events are ultimately on display to impress with style over substance and the screenplay makes little logic. While the movie has an interesting concept and few entertaining moments, the story is so confused and scattershot in tone that it isn't long before the film struggles to keep viewers invested in the plot. *Army of the Dead* may be one of the longest zombie movies ever made, but it ultimately feels half-baked and hollow.

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