

## 'Godzilla Minus One' may be the best movie in the entire 'Godzilla' franchise

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun  
Friday, 15 December 2023 05:35

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Rating: <<<<

out of <<<<<<

Running Time:  
125 minutes

**This feature from Toho is currently playing in the theater.**

2024 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an iconic legend in science-fiction film... a giant reptilian monster known to North American audiences as Godzilla. The success of the original Japanese film has spawned sequels and U.S. remakes (along with its own follow-ups) totaling nearly 40 titles. So, it should come as no surprise that Toho Co. Ltd. has decided to release a new feature based on the character.

*Godzilla Minus One* is actually a prequel to the 1954 original, making the task of creating a worthy effort even more challenging. Yet the final product ends up being one of, if not the best movies in the entire franchise.

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Set near the end of WWII, Japan is close to surrendering to U.S. forces. Knowing his assigned mission will not change the outcome of the conflict, young kamikaze pilot Koichi Shikishima (Ryunosuke Kamii) decides to fake a technical issue with his plane and land on a nearby island for repairs. While there, he and a team of mechanics encounter the titular monster.

Koichi survives and eventually returns home to learn that a bombing raid has wiped out most of his old neighborhood. Locals blame him for the country's loss and the guilt-ridden figure unexpectedly finds himself living in the ruins with a female survivor Noriko Ōishi (Minami Hamabe) and an orphaned baby. To support them, he takes dangerous ocean clean-up work on a minesweeping barge with captain Yōji Akitsu (Kuranosuke Sasaki), trainee Shirō Mizushima (Yuki Yamada) and ex-weapons engineer Kenji Noda (Hidetaka Yoshioka). With life beginning to improve, the group unexpectedly encounter a larger and even more powerful Godzilla.

Of course, the action presented here is thrilling to witness, with creatively rendered and effective scenes. For many films in this series, the tone has been decidedly over-the-top and kooky (aliens have even gotten involved in the shenanigans), with more attention paid to the monster's well-being than the humans underneath.

This film is a different story. Godzilla is a far more menacing presence, swimming around largely submerged like a shark before suddenly bursting up to throttle battleships. When the creature arrives on land, the movie makes sure to show the public in a truly terrified and imperiled state. The monster's heat ray is devastating to witness. It sends chills down the spine, looking truly reminiscent of an atomic blast.

Yes, the movie delivers on the action front, but it does something even more important in order to stand out. It is the first film that this reviewer can recall in which the human characters are well-developed and memorable.

Protagonist Koichi suffers deeply from survivor's syndrome, not even initially wanting to get close to his newfound family. And as the story progresses, remorse over previous actions drives the character to contemplate a real kamikaze attack on the enormous foe. He's a sympathetic character and interesting, as are Noriko and the infant. The lead's eccentric, downcast sailing compatriots also stand out with strong personalities.

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The fact that the movie focuses on the trials of average citizens is a distinctive touch that results in viewers rooting for them over the famous monster.

While almost everything does work, one can nitpick a moment or two. With a villain as grandiose as Godzilla, the human cast have to emote in a more demonstrative manner during a couple of scenes. There is also a scene after the climax that strains believability.

For a movie that, up to this climax, effectively deals with issues of loss, guilt and remorse, the script does tie up one plot thread in too bright a manner. Still, the fact that there are only one or two questionable dramatic notes in a movie about an enormous irradiated lizard speaks to how successful the final product is.

It's incredible that a movie made for about 1/15<sup>th</sup> of the budget of a Hollywood science-fiction feature can not only match, but in many ways outdo its wealthier competitors. That's because there is a lot more heart and soul in this entry than one would anticipate. Toho can take plenty of pride in the quality of *Godzilla Minus One* and note the fact that these giant monster films can still entertain, surprise and even move audiences 70 years after its debut.

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