Rating: «« out of 4

Running Time: 122 min.

Ever considered a perilous trek up the highest mountain on Earth? Everest may certainly dissuade any thoughts with a cold, harsh re-creation of what is perhaps the mountain's most infamous tragedy. As disaster films go, it features some great visuals and several tense moments. Yet it occasionally suffers from a lack of focus on a central role. While the events as depicted are harrowing, the storytelling leaves some emotional distance between the viewer and the characters.

Based on the ill-fated 1996 excursion to the summit peak, the plot follows two commercial tour groups that assist adventure seekers up Everest. The focus is on Adventure Consultants' owner Rob Hall (Jason Clarke) and his group of clients. They include a brash Texan (Josh Brolin) and a postal worker (John Hawkes) making his second and final attempt at the peak. Also along for the trip are the members of, Mountain Madness, a competing company headed by Scott Fischer (Jake Gyllenhaal).

As events progress, mistakes are made by just about all involved. With all the trips being made, there are numerous bottlenecks along the route and security ropes aren't properly installed, leading to various delays. That, along with the low oxygen levels, inexperience of several climbers and personal competition between the various businesses are a recipe for trouble. And before long, it finds them.

Clark still manages to make his character likable despite some questionable decisions made (of

course, it's always easy to judge in hindsight). We certainly feel empathy and sympathy for him and his struggle to succeed with his business, as well as help clients and friends achieve their dreams. Still, we don't feel it quite as intensely as hoped.

This is a fictionalized account, and part of the problem may be due to the fact that it's an ensemble piece with a dozen or more characters; the massive cast also includes Robin Wright, Michael Kelly, Sam Worthington, Keira Knightley and Emily Watson. Several get a bit lost in the shuffle. As events take a turn for the worse in the final third, we lose focus as the point-of-view shifts around. While some roles are clearly defined, most of the characters are heavily bundled for large chunks of the movie and it results in occasional difficulty determining who is onscreen (particularly when it comes to tour group crew members).

There are other storytelling decisions that may account for the lack of emotional investment. The movie frequently emphasizes how dangerous the hike is and that one omission could lead to instant death. When mistake after mistake is highlighted in such a short span of screen time, some of that compassion is diffused. And a few less-than-subtle disaster film conventions can't help but wedge their way into the proceedings. While many events really happened (teary-eyed goodbyes, sacrifices for the team, an inspirational action of hope and survival against the forces of nature), in this particular staging of the story, they still can't help but come across as grandly mounted genre tropes. At least there is plenty to enjoy on the technical side. The action is impressive and there are effectively cringe-inducing moments as blizzards and other maladies occur (including a character who suffers horrific frostbite on various areas of his body). As expected, the scenery is fantastic and there are some striking individual scenes that really maximize the incredible height and depth of the mountain. This includes a gorge crossing sequence and even a few smaller moments that include a character point-of-view exiting a tent and reveling in a spectacular Nepal landscape. The IMAX experience definitely helps in these moments, although just as much of the movie takes place in whiteout conditions and cramped tents.

Overall, I enjoyed Everest, although more for its technical merits than the narrative abilities. Additionally, the actors should be complimented in selling characters whom we don't get to spend a lot of time with. For this reviewer, it is ultimately not a great movie, but it is a good disaster flick that recounts the more harrowing details of this unfortunate journey with skill.