

THE MARTIAN: an Effective Sci-Fi Survivalist Tale

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 02 October 2015 03:48



Rating: <<<< **Out of 4**

Running Time: 141 min.

We've all seen plenty of movies about astronauts encountering danger on other worlds, but *The Martian* is a bit different. Instead of aliens, it strands its lead on the red planet and forces him to endure the elements. Call it a sci-fi survivalist tale, if you like.

The story begins on Mars, where a NASA crew are conducting scientific experiments. When an unexpected sandstorm hits, the group is forced to evacuate. Unfortunately, botanist Mark Watney (Matt Damon) is hit and wounded by a flying antenna. Thinking him dead, the crew leaves. Watney soon wakes up to find himself alone on Mars with little oxygen or food and no means of communication. He makes it to the crew's small habitat, but is forced to use his wits and come up with a means of existing for multiple years until the next team arrives.

What follows are numerous sequences in which Mark attempts to grow food and create water to sustain his crops. He moves from problem to problem, figuring out makeshift solutions. While the work details are complicated, the issues are easy enough to understand. It also helps that he states his goals and actions simply and succinctly (via some video logs). So it's actually quite interesting to see the character attempt to grow potatoes and deal with basic issues threatening his life.

There is a certain repetitious nature to the proceedings, but the unflappable lead character carries viewers through the slower sections. Watney is a relatable, nice guy and his sense of humor helps engage audiences and sympathize with his plight. New predicaments arise quickly

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and wisely, audiences are given little time from one threat to the next.

After a time, communications are established and many others become involved. This includes NASA employees back on Earth (Chiwetel Ejiofor, Sean Bean, Donald Glover, Jeff Daniels, Kristen Wiig) as well as the shocked, guilt-ridden mission Captain (Jessica Chastain) and her crew (Michael Pena, Kate Mara, Sebastian Stan, Aksel Hernie). The Earthbound bickering and ideas about how to handle the situation break up many of the trials on Mars and add more interpersonal conflict to the proceedings.

As expected in all Scott productions, the photography is especially strong. The Mars landscapes (shot in Jordan) look otherworldly and imposing. In total the images on ground and in weightless spacecrafts that are captured by cinematographer Dariusz Wolski (*Prometheus*, *The Walk*) are consistently striking. The 3D also looks impressive, with the canyon geography adding some nice depth to the shots.

For those who are familiar with the book, there are a few minor deviations. Naturally, the film adaptation is abbreviated, a few of Mark's troubles are edited out and there's a more elaborate climax. Still, if you weren't aware of the material, you wouldn't likely miss any of it.

There are a couple of minor beefs, though. The format of solving concern after concern is repetitive. There are a lot of problems encountered and the solutions frequently lead to mission control technicians breaking into wild celebrations - it all appears premature given the situation and these moments are repeated too many times.

Perhaps this critic's biggest concern is that there's little in the way of subtext. Despite all of the bells and whistles, this is a simple story about man overcoming the elements. That's all well and good, but there isn't any more to be gleaned from the story than what appears before you. You'll enjoy it once, but one might not gain any more insight from repeat viewings.

Still, as critiques go, that isn't much to complain about. On the whole, this is a very strong adaptation and an incredibly enjoyable film. It's hard to imagine this particular story being told in a more effectively or exciting way. There can be no doubt that *The Martian* is a surefire crowd-pleaser that will play well to armchair space travelers all season long.

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