

'Kong: Skull Island' does its monsters proud, but ignores humans

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 120 min.

I have a confession to make. As a kid, I grew up watching old giant monster movies on TV weekend afternoons, featuring the likes of Godzilla and other fantastical creatures. As a result I still have a fondness for them. Looking back, most of those films weren't particularly strong (and some are downright awful), but they were fun. *Kong: Skull Island* feels a bit like one of those old movies, only heightened with top-tier special effects. It's certainly enjoyable to an extent. Yet after so many iterations, these movies still forget an essential element that can really elevate a story - the human characters.

This re-imagining is set in the early 70s. Bill Randa (John Goodman), the head of a secret government bureau named Monarch, is given clearance to lead an expedition to a hidden island in the South Pacific. Leading the team is Army Lieutenant Colonel Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson), along with a group of soldiers and scientists. Also along for the ride is tracker James Conrad (Tom Hiddleston) and photographer Mason Weaver (Brie Larson). It isn't long after their arrival that the group come under attack from numerous giant species, getting separated and losing their way. Conrad and Weaver encounter Hank Marlow (John C. Reilly), a man who has been stuck on the island for 30 years and enlist his assistance in getting them back to a recovery site.

As mentioned, there's plenty of action here and most of it is very well-executed. Helicopters come under attack and are grasped out of the air and crunched. There are some impressive POV crash moments as characters are thrown around, with plenty of slow-motion shots of destruction and torn metal. And when the characters are in the jungle, they fare no better, facing

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off against lizard-like predators dubbed “Skull Crawlers.” These beasts are appropriately menacing, although I would have liked to have seen them hidden in the shadows a bit longer. Regardless, the action here is fine. It’s creatively shot and at times quite thrilling to watch.

Still, there are problems... namely the characters. Marlow is harmlessly unhinged enough to earn some laughs and stand out from the crowd, but most of the other leads are one-note. Heroes Conrad and Weaver aren’t given much to do except react to events occurring around them. Sadly, there is little in the way of sharp banter and the protagonists are not developed enough for viewers to have much of a rooting interest in them. Additionally, the simple motivations of expedition-head Randa and revenge-minded Packard seem silly and difficult to fathom at times.

Part of the problem is that there are too many characters in general. There’s a whole team sent to the island and early on the movie struggles to establish the twenty-plus persons involved. The odd thing is that many of the bit parts are entirely unnecessary and could have been dropped or been amalgamated, allowing for more time with the leads. As it stands, the movie seems exclusively interested in presenting action. There’s an attack and then a quick dissolve into creaky exposition, suggesting that all of the personal interactions have been pared to the bone in editing. It’s a strange choice, given that there’s ultimately very little at stake here story-wise beyond the survival of its human characters.

And the 70s setting, while interesting, attempts to set up a subtle Vietnam analogy in which the army steps in to take control and find themselves in over their heads. We’ve seen this done before in films like *Aliens* and handled more with more effectiveness.

Still, there is some fun to be had when the characters are being hunted by the nasty creatures or when Kong is rampaging through the jungle - older kids who can handle the carnage will certainly get a kick out of it. And the post-credit scene promises even more monster mayhem in the near future. *Kong: Skull Island* does its monsters proud, but future tales need to focus just as much attention on the little people fleeing in terror.

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