

'Life' delivers old school, creature-feature chills

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 24 March 2017 09:53



Rating: ««« out of 4

Running Time: 104 min.

Sometimes, science-fiction can challenge viewers with brave, visionary ideas about the future and our place as humans in it. *Life* boasts an impressive cast and early ads for the feature might suggest a heady, thoughtful science-fiction feature about the significance of discovering life on another planet. However, that's not at all what this film is really about. This is a slickly produced monster-movie, pure and simple. It follows the horror genre formula from beginning to end, with characters desperately attempting to stop being consumed by a strange, tentacle-spewing creature with a nasty disposition.

The plot involves a small group of astronauts orbiting Earth on the International Space Station. Specifically, doctors David Jordan (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Miranda North (Rebecca Ferguson), scientist Hugh Derry (Ariyon Bakare), technician Roy Adams (Ryan Reynolds) as well as ship crew Kat (Olga Dihovichnaya) and Sho Kendo (Hiroyuki Sanada). After recovering a space probe from Mars, the group discover a single-celled organism in a soil sample. At first they're excited about finding the first life form from another planet. Unfortunately for the characters, this movie isn't called "A Promising and Beneficial Space Discovery." Instead, the specimen awakens, begins growing and attacks the crew for sustenance.

Yes, it's pretty clear from the get-go that this isn't exactly an exercise in restraint or deep-probing questions about our place in the universe. Even the score seems unnecessarily grandiose for a small group of people trapped in an enclosed space with a monster. The movie also appears to borrow elements from titles like *Alien*. Yet somehow, while following all of the expected conventions, it still manages to add a wrinkle here and there that provides thrills and

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chills along the way.

Swedish director Daniel Espinoza (*Safe House*) has handled action scenes in the past and he does so again more than efficiently. He opens the movie with a long, elaborately staged master shot that introduces all of the leads, moves through the many ship environments and introduces the incoming space probe. It's an impressive beginning, hinting that there is a bit more technical skill on display than in a typical genre feature. The tight enclosures and angles help maintain a consistent level of tension throughout the proceedings.

This is very apparent during an extremely tense fight early on in a science lab between alien and crew member and several encounters with the alien throughout. And when the organism moves around the ship, it does so in a unique way, using zero gravity and bouncing off of walls. The creature itself is unique and does some pretty disturbing things to wipe out its human prey. And while the final scene didn't deliver as big a surprise as intended, it still managed to plant a devious grin on my face.

The movie is also elevated by its strong cast. This may be some silly stuff, but the performers are all fully committed to the material and attempt to give their characters a little more nuance than one would expect. And there are some allusions to the survival instinct that may make one consider their own propensity for consumption as well as the cost to and fear from those being devoured.

Admittedly, that last comment is a bit of a stretch; this is a simple scare movie through and through. But those contented with straight-forward thrills and the occasional gross-out moment will find that the film effectively delivers the goods. *Life* is far from a classic, but horror fans will discover that with little more than a new coat of paint, the old-fashioned creature-feature can still produce a good-natured jolt now and again.

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