

## Steven Soderbergh's Riveting 'Contagion' With Matt Damon

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 8, 2011 - 10:01am

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – A few weeks ago saw the release of the R-rated “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark,” a gore-free creature feature that was given the MPAA stamp of 17-plus due to “pervasive scariness.” This week sees the PG-13-rated “Contagion,” a film SO much more pervasively scary than the movie about goblins in a distant mansion because, well, it’s about the fact that the world is pervasively scary. When you’re done seeing Steven Soderbergh’s accomplished thriller, as you take the CTA or, God forbid, get on a plane or train, think about how many times you touch your face or common areas. And then try not to cry.

One of our most versatile directors has turned his gaze to the what-if scenarios presented by each new health scare. Swine Flu, H1N1, West Nile. Every time that a new disease turns up somewhere in the world, we all ask ourselves those questions – Is this the one? The one that will be more than just a headline? The one that will kill someone I know? The one that will change the world? “Contagion” features an all-star cast, one of our best directors, and an excellent screenwriter turning those questions into things of realistic fiction. Soderbergh’s riveting film, much of which was shot in Chicago, is fictional...for now.



Contagion

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures



Soderbergh and writer Scott Z. Burns ("The Bourne Ultimatum," "The Informant!") attempt to tell an international story with multiple characters in relatively-broad strokes. It is an arguably cold film that doesn't allow much time for character development by virtue of how many stories it's trying to tell simultaneously. It's also a film paced like it's about a speeding train. When we're talking about a disease that could wipe out entire cities, there's little time for chit-chat. "Contagion" is an incredibly packed feature, running less than two hours but as packed with incredible actors and subplots as an Irwin Allen disaster pic, and yet Soderbergh (with some of the best editing of the year from Oscar-winner Stephen Mirrione) never lets it get away from him. We always care. We're always interested. We're always terrified.

If you really break down "Contagion" on a character level, it does offer a "one of each" mentality to screenwriting. There's the doctor, writer, infected, widowed, leader, bureaucrat, savior, victim, etc. Yet each of the multiple arcs feels essential to the fabric of the piece, which is one of its greatest accomplishments. Often in films as broad as this one, it's easy for the viewer to pick a favorite arc or at least choose one that they wish occupied less screen time. "Contagion" is never less than riveting, perfectly balancing multiple characters and arcs from minute one to its spectacular final scene.

If there's a central arc to "Contagion," it probably belongs to poor Mitch Emhoff (Matt Damon). In the opening minutes of the film, Mitch's wife Beth (Gwyneth Paltrow) returns home from a business trip to Hong Kong with what seems like a bad cold. The next day she has a terrifying seizure in the kitchen and dies. While in the hospital trying to get his questions answered, Mitch's stepson dies. And then he learns that his clearly-contagious wife stopped off to see an old flame during her layover on return from Hong Kong. Mitch is having a bad day.



Contagion

*Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures*

While Mitch tries to wrap his brain around the death and betrayal in his world, other people are dropping dead – a man on a bus, a waiter from the casino that Beth visited, and so on. Where did this disease start? Where is it going? Can it be stopped? These are the questions for Dr. Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne) and his team, including Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet) and Dr. Ally Hextall (a great Jennifer Ehle, who has enough screen time that she should be above the credits with her co-stars). Mears goes to Minnesota to try and stem the outbreak on the ground while Hextall gets to work in the lab trying to find a cure.

On far ends of the world, Dr. Leonora Orantes (Marion Cotillard) tries to trace the virus back to its source, watching security tapes from the casino and attempting to find patient zero, while an awkward writer named Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law) becomes the first to expose the lies being told the populous about the dangers that they are about to face. Great actors pop up in small roles including John Hawkes, Demetri Martin, Elliott Gould, Bryan Cranston, and Sanaa Lathan.



Contagion

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Clearly, this is one of 2011's most-talented ensembles. While this is not a performance-driven piece, having an A-list cast like this one makes a huge difference overall. And none of them are preening or showing off as if in a star vehicle. They're merely inhabiting their characters in believable ways and making the most of their screen time, as limited as it may be. Stand-outs include Winslet, Cotillard, Fishburne, Ehle, and, most of all, Law, giving his best performance in years.

But this is not an actor's piece. It is a technical, directorial marvel. It is rare for a director to tackle an international story with the confidence displayed here by Steven Soderbergh. From the very beginning, one can sense the fact that they are watching the work of a master. There's a confidence in every shot, every angle, every line. The film will be too cold for some viewers, and I respect that, but it's undeniably a technical marvel. And, given the germ-phobic atmosphere that simply must have pervaded this production, can you really blame the filmmakers for making a movie that might be called sterile?

*"Contagion" stars Matt Damon, Laurence Fishburne, Jude Law, Marion Cotillard, Kate Winslet, Jennifer Ehle, Bryan Cranston, John Hawkes, Sanaa Lathan, Enrico Colantoni, and Gwyneth Paltrow. It was written by Scott Z. Burns and directed by Steven Soderbergh. It is rated PG-13 and opens on September 9th, 2011.*



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