

Despite Sci-Fi Intrigue, ‘The Host’ Favors Teen Romance

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Author Stephenie Meyer can’t help herself. Despite breaking out from the “Twilight” saga and creating science fiction in her latest novel, it still features angst-ridden teen romance, which becomes less important versus the bizarre other worldly infiltration in the film adaptation of “The Host.”

The look and feel of “The Host” gives it some promise, the new order of the earth is an alien race who penetrate humans and take over their beings. The stark, hospital-like production design is the best part of the film, as the beginning establishes the history of the takeover and its latest victim. Where the film breaks down is in the teen romance, as an invaded teen girl fights inside herself between the alien force and her old soul. It’s awkward, and involves too many hunks cast for their looks and not their ability to deliver a performance. The underground race of humans fighting the aliens take the girl in, and conveniently ally with her, despite jeopardizing their mission. There are too many unintentional laughs in this scenario, and not enough of the film’s strength, which is the science fiction.

Melanie (Saoirse Ronan) is a human being on the run, determined not to be captured and used as a “host” for extraterrestrial aliens (The Seekers) who have taken over most of the earth, by assimilating themselves inside people and taking over their bodies. She desires to protect her brother Jamie (Jamie Canterbury) and continue her romance with Jared (Max Irons), while fighting the alien foes. However, she is captured, and is forced into the alien soul of “The Wanderer.”



Who Do You Love?: Melanie/Wanda (Saoirse Ronan) and Jared (Max Irons) in ‘The Host’
Photo credit: Open Road Films

But there is a difference, The Wanderer (or as she is now dubbed, Wanda) can hear the old Melanie inside, fighting within her consciousness. Melanie is trying to convince Wanda to leave the body and give it back to her former self. She is able to convince Wanda to find to her Uncle Jeb (William Hurt) and Aunt Maggie (Frances Fisher), who live in a secluded cave dwelling and nurture the humans resisting the assimilation of the aliens. Those humans include Melanie's lover Jared, her brother Jamie and Ian (Jake Abel), who falls for the Wanda persona. This could be the most complex love triangle ever.

What best represents the film is the production design, especially the style of The Seekers, which are about all white outfits and stainless steel accessories. Given the radical on-the-brink problems of today's world, the coolness of being assimilated is presented as not too bad an option. But of course this is an "evil" to the heroic underground fighters, who conveniently have all the comforts of home in their cave dwelling in the middle of a desert, including hot springs and electricity. This lessens the impact of their desperation, especially since it's all self sustaining, and hidden by a complex security system. Why not just chill in this version of Eden?

There are some complexities regarding the host circumstance that were probably explained easier in the source novel than in the film. For example, when the consciousness inside Melanie has a conversation with Wanda, it would most likely seem more reasonable and accessible in the book, but when actually illustrated on screen, it's loaded with unintentional laughs. Saoirse Ronan, so excellent in "Hanna" (2011), is game to try anything with Melanie/Wanda, but even her excellent performance skills get whiplashed by the split personality. Mostly, she was self-contained in the film, and asked to woo two different hunks through two different personas. The script did her no favors, but she also had trouble delivering that interpretation.

In the dramatic battle between The Seekers and the underground warriors, the actors playing The Seekers were much more interesting, just because they had a bit of mystery to them. Veteran movie star William Hurt is crusty but benign as Uncle Jed, and has to blow with the wind regarding Wanda, who is the mortal enemy but somehow "okay" because she was once Melanie. The exiled resistance warriors are also too pretty, so hunks Max Irons and Jake Abel are out-of-place in the dystopia, and exist to make love to Melanie or Wanda, on whichever day she feels like kissing one or the other (in melty teenage romance close-ups).



Ice Queen: The Seeker (Diane Kruger) in 'The Host'
Photo credit: Open Road Films

This is also the type of film that has several endings, in which literally the audience will shuffle to get their coats, and then find out that it wasn't the ending. The production even tacks on a "class portrait" of the resistance warriors, which for sure seems like the film's end, but then it isn't. This defines "problem with the script," even though director Andrew Niccol is also listed as the screenplay adapter.

So essentially the enemies in the film are cooler than the heroes, the romance is schizophrenic and the pretty people intermingling with each other are distractingly conflicted. It might be best to stick with marshmallow peeps and jelly beans this weekend.

"The Host" opens everywhere on March 29th. Featuring Saoirse Ronan, Rachel Roberts, William Hurt, Max Irons, Frances Fisher and Jake Abel. Screenplay adapted by Andrew Niccol, based on a novel by Stephenie Meyer. Directed by Andrew Niccol. Rated "PG-13"



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