

Entertaining ‘The Martian’ is a Hollywood Space Opera

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 5, 2015 - 1:47pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – It’s all based on science, they told us! “The Martian” is an old fashion feel-good movie about the hard working astronauts and scientists of the good old American space program, trying to rescue a stranded spaceman from Mars, aided by a brave cast of astro-colleagues.

This film is a reminder of other space rescue suspense operas that have come before it, most recognizably “Marooned” (1969) and “Apollo 13” (1995). The All-Star cast is also a reminder of those types of “name” ensemble cast films as well – “hey, is that Kristen Wiig?” All that aside, “The Martian” is a tour de force, pitting Matt Damon’s astronaut character in a sly castaway-in-space mashup, and the special effects and production design are flawless. This is what the current technology in movies are about, the ability to place human beings in other worlds, yet express a recognizable atmosphere in a familiar emotional realm. The film is a bit too twee about the American rah-rah spirit, but that can be forgiven because the production, which is directed by sci-fi veteran Ridley Scott, delivers the entertainment goods.

In the near future, a mission to Mars is interrupted by a atmospheric sandstorm on the planet, so violent that the exploration has to be scrubbed, and the crew has to blast off quickly from the surface. As they are getting back to the mother ship, astronaut Mark Watney (Damon) is clipped by debris and thought to be dead. He actually is alive, but the rocket leaves Mars without him.



An Astronaut Stranded: Watney (Matt Damon) is ‘The Martian’

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

Alone as one human being on a vast globe, Watney has to figure out how to survive, until the next mission comes to the planet in two years. He manages to communicate to earth that he still exists, and now NASA director Sanders (Jeff Daniels) has to figure out how to rescue a man given up for dead. Meanwhile, the Mars mission crew (Jessica Chastain, Michael Peña, Askel Hennie, Kate Mara and Sebastian Stan) have guilt for leaving their comrade behind. There are many decisions yet to be made to get the American astronaut back home.

The film is mostly about the best minds in the country (and ultimately the world) getting together to figure out how to rescue a life – there is even a scene that teaches Watney how to build a device, just like the geek squad air filter scene in “Apollo 13.” And of course it contains the suspense elements that only outer space can provide, like extreme temperature conditions, oxygen needs, supply issues and cool equipment. All can either run out or go to Code Red at any juncture, and the story exploits those plot devices quite effectively.

Matt Damon is perfect astronaut casting, in this case a botanist and engineer who is on the mission for soil analysis. The character is given a sense of survival and humor (“suck it, Neil Armstrong” in reference to his discoveries), and Damon’s clean cut charm contains the right level of determination, without every going too over the top. The film rightly places him as the ultimate loner, and surviving with that burden is part of the suspense.

The supporting cast – like a 1970s disaster movie ensemble – is a mix of the earnest, heroic and laughably miscast. Jeff Daniels as the NASA chief is pretty much doing his Will McAvoy from “The Newsroom,” so he’s found a good fallback brand of character. Donald Glover was perfect as the math nerd who figures out a key equation. On the flipside, Jessica Chastain continues her impropriety of being too runway model-like to portray a NASA Mission Commander (as she was in playing a CIA operative in “Zero Dark Thirty”). Let’s just say in space, no one can hear your Dental Plan – she had very white teeth.



Mr. Lonely: The Astronaut Contemplates His Fate in ‘The Martian’
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

There is a bit a cynicism felt towards the display of citizen concern, in their wondering if Watney would be brought home, with crowds gathering in public squares all over the world. Would there be such celebrations in our instant communication lives that exist now? The gut instinct says no. But this is meant to be a feel-good film, celebrating the science that it takes to boldly go, etc., and the smaller heroes that create the equations and infrastructure that accomplishes that goal. Damn the federal budget overruns, full steam ahead. USA! USA!

Anyway, it’s a pleasure to enjoy a human suspense film filled with guts and glitter. This is pure entertainment, blasting off in its hopefulness as well as the requisite survival action. To reference that bright aspect of Jessica Chastain’s beauty, “The Martian” is a movie with great teeth.

“The Martian” opens everywhere in 3D and IMAX 3D on October 2nd. See local listings for 3D/IMAX show times. Featuring Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Kristen Wiig, Jeff Daniels, Michael Peña, Kate Mara, Sebastian Stan, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Donald Glove. Screenplay adapted by drew Goddard, based on a novel by Andy Weir. Directed by Ridley Scott. Rated “PG-13”



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