

Odd Times at the Cinema with ‘The Great Wall’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Taking a concept higher than the Wall that inspired it, and mostly succeeding, “The Great Wall” gets a nod as one of the oddest stories in a long time. Pre-supposedly based on a “legend,” it brings Matt Damon into ancient China to help battle lizard monsters at the Great Wall. Book it.

What makes it work is that it has a “Treasure of Sierra Madre” element to it, that the white European mercenaries are there to get the “black powder,” the just invented and explosive gunpowder. The raid by the lizard monsters is something out of 1950s sci-fi – they are Creature-from-the-Black-Lagoon like – and would have been better if they didn’t look so cartoony. When I see 10,000 of those beasties coming at me down the valley I don’t care what Great Wall is protecting me, I’m outta there. Matt Damon, however, stays, and despite his character’s previous willingness to move on to the next job, the Chinese fascinate him enough to help in the fight. History meets destiny, or something to that effect.

It is the time of the Song Dynasty in China, approximately 900-1200 AD. Two war mercenaries William (Matt Damon) and Tovar (Pedro Pascal), after fighting bandits all in search of black (gun) powder, finds themselves captured by the Chinese. They do have some information to trade, a severed hand that belongs to a “Tao Tie,” a lizard monster that attacks China every sixty years, according to legend.



Weapons Ready: Matt Damon is William in 'The Great Wall'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

When the attack comes, it is overwhelming. Thousands of Tao Ties descend into the valley below the Great Wall of China, and try to breach the barrier. The warriors, including Commander Lin (Jing Tian), are able to fight off the first attack, but they are not sure if they can fight the attacks to come. Another westerner, Sir Ballard (Willem Dafoe), wants to help the mercenaries escape, but William wants to stay and fight.

The attacks are truly bizarre, the creatures look like giant Gila Monsters, and communicate by vibrating their crowns. The CGI makes them both terrifying and fake, and quite frankly they are so menacing that it would take some really brass fortitude to fight them – I recommend a peace council. But fight they do, with some acrobatic techniques and fireballs from the sky. Visually, it is a mishmash when put together, but it is so strange it was fascinating.

It's also a very weird choice for a Matt Damon film, but it was being directed by Zhang Yimou ("Raise the Red Lantern," "Hero"), and who wouldn't want to be an ancient bow-and-arrow man, I suppose. His line readings are stiff, and his motivations slim, but there he was. Willem Dafoe portrays a kind of Iago-type turncoat, but adds a decent sliminess to a typical hero film.



Jing Tian is Commander Lin in ‘The Great Wall’
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

There was also something alluring about the history of China – including the amazing inventions of the ancient culture – and the mystery of The Great Wall. It could have been more interesting to show actual historic battles at that wall, especially with the whole team gathered there, but if the filmmakers thought giant lizards was a more saleable foe, so be it. They could have also represented the impending infiltration of Asia by the Europeans, but that’s for “Film Symbolism 101” students, and doubtful to any loftier intentions.

The film has already grossed \$220 million in China after a December release, so the American debut is more gravy on the train, and the producers will probably not care about the derisive reviews at such a war fantasy. The Chinese Yuan spends just as well as an American dollar, and there are billions of those to access, which is why they call it show “business.”

“The Great Wall” opens every where on February 17th, in 3D and regular screenings. See local listings for 3D theaters and showtimes. Featuring Matt Damon, Tian Jing, Willem Dafoe, Pedro Pascal and Hanyu Zhang. Screenplay by Carlo Bernard, Doug Miro and Tony Gilroy. Directed by Yimou Zhang. Rated “PG-13”



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