There Are Just Enough Reasons to Go Ape Over 'Rampage'

Submitted by JonHC [1] on April 12, 2018 - 12:37pm

- Adam Sztykiel [2]
- based on a video game [3]
- Brad Peyton [4]
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Rating: **2.5**/5.0

CHICAGO - As a whole, we have a fascination with watching destruction in front of us. It provides a catharsis from our heavily stressed lives, especially in the Trump era. It provides a necessary release of aggression, the same way video games do for people. "Rampage" scratches that itch, but only if you aren't also looking to be intellectually stimulated or care about plot coherence.

Let's start with the origins of this film. I'm not talking about the studio executive pitch room where someone was thinking about what projects could use Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson. I'm talking about the video game of the same name. In the video game, you get a choice between three monsters (that were once men), and the objective is to destroy buildings, eat soldiers and occasionally save an attractive, pixelated woman from the building you're destroying. The game didn't pretend to have a high concept, but instead delivered exactly what it thought the average game player wanted: destruction. In many ways, "Rampage" (the film) does the same, fueling the average viewers need for disaster porn and big, muscular beasts.

Johnson's charismatic shimmer seems to be turning dim with each subsequent film where his natural affability and undeniable hunkiness are the only things saving an otherwise subpar film. As with any drug (and yes, "The Rock" is a drug to some), the more you take, the less effective they become. In "Rampage", Johnson plays a slightly toned down version of his "Fast and Furious" persona, but with more similarities to his character in "San Andreas", especially with his near single-minded focus on saving his family (albino ape George in this case). It is not a coincidence that this film feels similar to "San Andreas", especially since they share a director, screenplay writer, and lead actor.

Look out kaiju's, there are two new beasts in town ready to 'Rampage'
Photo credit: Warner Bros Pictures

Brad Peyton is no stranger to directing muscled men, with his credits including two previous films starring Dwayne Johnson ("San Andreas", "Journey 2: The Mysterious Island") and Netflix series "Frontier", starring Jason Momoa ("Game of Thrones", "Aquaman"). Peyton understands the power of destruction, and appeal to watching it take place on-screen. He channels city crumbling experience from "San Andreas", and recreates it by having the natural disaster be the unnatural mutation of animals. Just because it is competently done and looks visually serviceable doesn't mean we haven't seen this all before. Whether it's a natural disaster, mutant animals, aliens, or Transformers, these mass destruction films are all beginning to blend into one big blur of building rubble and testosterone-drenched male heroes.

Like the 4 beasts in the film (yes, I'm counting Dwayne Johnson among them), "Rampage" had a similar sized writing crew consisting of action genre writers Carlton Cuse, Ryan Engle, and Ryan J. Condal to beef up the story and Johnson's character, and mostly comedy writer Adam Sztykiel to give the film the humorous tone it otherwise would have failed without. As I mentioned before, the only thing there was to work with as far as source material was concerned was the fact that monsters attack buildings along the Midwest. Creating a partly passable film plot from that was always going to be a monster of an undertaking, but partly passable was definitely achieved. Like the video game, "Rampage" delivers on the only front that matters, and that is monsters destroying a major city, this time it's my hometown of Chicago. Every other element, including logic, is secondary to that. If anything, "Rampage" could have done with a lot less of the human element since that is as poorly developed as the plot.

If they can survive a plane crash, they can take on a few monsters in 'Rampage'
Photo credit: Warner Bros Pictures

To make things even simpler, the film relies on well-worn character archetypes. There is the muscular male hero (Dwayne Johnson) with a Special Forces past who is forced to call back on his skill set to save the thing he cares about the most. Then we have the well-intentioned scientist (Naomie Harris) that "plays God" and ends us creating the monsters. We can't forget about the already existing corporate monsters (Malin Akerman and Jake Lacy) that value profit over human lives. Like a cross between Mr. Burns from "The Simpsons", and Ivanka and Eric Trump from real life. What kind of disaster film would this be without a cowboy bureaucrat (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) that plays by the rules until he realizes he doesn't have to? Every character is as two-dimensional as the video game it is based on, and some are even less than that (like Joe Manganiello's short-lived role as a merc for hire). The best character in the entire film is George (the ape), who provides almost all of the comedic relief for the film by making sex jokes and giving Dwayne Johnson the finger on several occasions.

Making a film out of a video game (like "Tomb Raider", "Resident Evil", and "Warcraft") is hard enough to do. Trying to make one out of a video game from the early 90's or earlier is more so, especially since video games didn't have plots or cohesive stories to work with. People might find that they enjoy playing "Rampage" more than watching it.

"Rampage" opens everywhere on April 13th. Featuring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Naomie Harris, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Malin Akerman, Joe Manganiello, and Jake Lacy. Directed by Brad Peyton. Written by Ryan Engle, Carlton Cuse, Ryan J. Condal, and Adam Sztykiel. Rated "PG-13"

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