

The Impossible

If you are up for a movie that first offers a figurative punch to the gut then treats you to a balm of familial redemption, catch “The Impossible,” the utterly unbelievable but true survival story of a Spanish family of five torn asunder by the 2004 Thailand tsunami which killed some 250,000 people. The film was made by Spanish director Juan Antonio Bayona (“The Orphanage”) and his scriptwriter Sergio G. Sanchez and proved a smash success in Spain since its autumn release and opened in the US just in time for Christmas.

The filmmakers changed the family’s nationality--probably for international sales reasons—from Spanish to vaguely English (the script never indicates their country of origin) and cast Naomi Watts (as Maria) and Ewan McGregor (Henry) as the parents. While they are on Christmas holiday with their three boys, the tsunami demolishes their hotel, separating Maria and the oldest boy, Lucas (Tom Holland) from the other three.

The opening is all bright and blissful as the close-knit family is enjoying a relaxing Christmas holiday at a splendid beach hotel on Thailand’s coast (except for a bumpy plane flight that portends something ominous). Soon, and shockingly, however, one morning gambol in the hotel pool is smashed by the gigantic wall of water that is the tsunami, the more disorienting because the day is so idyllic.

The first half of the film follows the travails of mom and son through not only the stupendous flash flood—after which they miraculously find each other--but also injury, confusion, and weariness in their frantic search for safety and for the rest of the family. They end up, through the kindness of local Thais, in a patched-up hospital where Maria must be treated for a nasty leg wound while Lucas continues the search for his father.

Shift to a second half of the story concerns Henry and his two younger boys, who have found each other and survived intact. They, too, go on their own search for Maria and Lucas, but Henry must first agonizingly place his boys, only 8 and 4, in the care of others looking for safety at higher ground. He then struggles on alone, trying to pick up any clues to where his family might be. However, Henry never gives up hope of finding the others, and neither does Lucas, as he jumpstarts his maturity and learns how to help others. The two stories are finally intercut as they merge toward a gripping finale.

The acting in “The Impossible” may in part take second place to the stunning effects—the tsunami and its aftermath of spectacular back-and-forth flooding—which were produced in giant water tanks built in Spain by Bayona and his crew. The director wanted to provide convincing drama and genuine terror for his actors in actual water, so foreground CGI effects were foregone to concentrate on Watts and Holland struggling in the massive tanks. The effort took many months of planning and execution. The authenticity of the later survival and rescue scenes was achieved by location shooting in Thailand itself.

Still, there are excellent performances all around in “The Impossible.” The leads, Watts and McGregor, must spend much of their screen time with alternately panicked, then concerned, then haunted looks, but both actors still find some dimensions in their characters and achieve real sympathy as devoted, never-say-die parents. Their two smaller boys are priceless--natural little actors. But the film’s revelation is Tom Holland,

16 when the film was made, who incarnates Lucas as a paragon of pluck for his mother and his family. The young man should receive recognition for his stirring performance in the upcoming awards season.

(Running 114 min., the film is "PG-13.").

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