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Ewe Hall **By JE**



Latest disaster film makes critical imp

(AP) — Pre-millennial Hollywood just loves doing in the world. In the past couple of years alone, filmmakers have besieged us with alien nasties, poured molten lava on our cities, loosed deadly viruses upon our populace, even sent killer tornados to chase Helen Hunt.

In this environment of global self-flagellation, mass destruction by an errant comet was probably inevitable. But who expected an expensive disaster movie to be so humanistic and watchable?

Deep Impact, the latest attempt to kill off humanity (suggested alternate title: "What If the World Ended and MSNBC Covered the Story?"), is top notch sci-fi that also succeeds pretty well as topnotch drama — a believable account of a celestial body that fell to Earth. It even has character development.

Seems rising young MSNBC reporter Jenny Lerner (Tea Leoni, venturing into husband David Duchovny's sci-fi bailiwick), seeking a White House sex scandal, stumbles onto something even more dangerous than Monica Lewinsky: an ELE, or extinction level event — a comet on a collision course with Earth.

The plot unfolds engagingly, if not unpredictably, from there. But it is the characters who make *Deep Impact* rise above the ordinary Hollywood fare.

Director Mimi Leder makes the most of her material with help from able cinematographers, special effects artists and a gripping, muted score by James Newton Howarth. Leder does well with gentle moments — a contemplative here, a close-up of a hand, a stolen second of silence between two leads.

It's almost as if *Deep Impact* were two films, one about people, one about doom; shame the former time didn't allow more opportunity to zoom in more on the characters we really begin to care about.

It is probably too much to ask for a big-budget disaster movie to be both nuanced and a box office draw. But this film comes off as more than most, and the special effects-obsessed Hollywood machine should take note. *Deep Impact* proves it's possible to mix the two and create a genre now and then.

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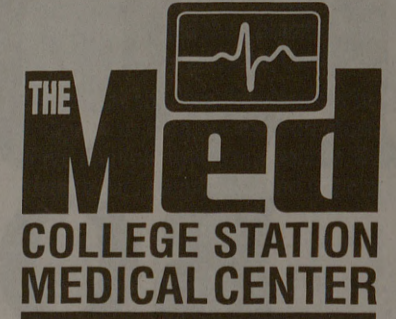
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