



"The Big Empty"
Lion's Gate Pictures
Starring Sean Bean, Jon Favreau

"The Big Empty" is a hard movie to classify. What starts off as a quirky character-driven film with great potential turns - in a heart-beat - into an enigmatic open-ended alien flick with philosophical overtones. The speck-on-the-radar independent film boasts an impressive collection of actors and stellar visuals that create an almost enjoyable film. The starkness of the desert is perfectly showcased by cinematographer Chris Manley.

The always funny Jon Favreau stars as John Person, a struggling actor who is slowly sinking under a mountain of debts. Instead of worrying about his financial situation, he spends his nights pondering which photograph would best sell him to potential directors. Person's financial problems are offered a reprieve when a mysterious neighbor (Bud Cort) offers Person enough money to erase his debts if he will simply take a blue briefcase into the middle of the desert to the small town of Baker, Calif. Cort plays the bizarre neighbor Neely with such oddness that viewers will be simultaneously repulsed and attracted to the squat little man. Neely and an unnamed group seem to know quite a lot about Person as Neely so carefully explains. Conversations such as this drive the first half of the movie as Person takes Neely up on his offer and makes his way to Baker to transfer the mysterious suitcase to an even more mysterious man named Cowboy.

While Person waits for Cowboy, he is introduced to the denizens of the small town in which he is now trapped. Daryl Hannah plays the town bartender, Stella, who must watch over her rowdy daughter, Ruthie. Ruthie (Rachael Leigh Cook) is more interested in living life to the fullest, partaking in binge drinking and sleeping around. It's Ruthie's promiscuity that drives Randy (Adam Beach) wild. Randy hopes to marry Ruthie, and her constant flirting with Person drives him crazy. The real standout of the film is Jon Gries' portrayal of hotel manager Elron. Completely bonkers, Elron's subdued antics and dialogue will leave audiences anticipating his next appearance. Elron tells Person that a pornographic movie was filmed in his hotel room.

After Neely is found dead, an eccentric member of the cast is introduced with Kelsey Grammer's performance as FBI agent Banks. Banks is a slightly crazed investigator who stops at nothing to prove Person is tied to Neely's disappearance. With Sean Bean's Irish Cowboy, who is the mysterious leader behind a cult of track suit wearing wannabe alien abducts, the main cast of eccentrics is complete.

The character interactions in the first half of the movie showcase first-time director/writer Steve Anderson's knack for creating quirky and interesting characters that dominate the screen and intrigue the audience. Every line of dialogue contains quietly subdued hilarity.

With one scene, the movie's tone changes dramatically into a mix between a bad "Repo Man"/"X-Files" clone and "The Big Lebowski." Mixing bowling with an alien conspiracy, the movie's final plot borders on pretentious. Offering few answers and lacking initiative for audiences to create their own images, the film's final scene seems like a bad art house film created for the Sci-Fi Channel. With such a wonky mishmash of genres, it's easy for many potential viewers to be turned off. Clever dialogue and great acting will keep audiences watching, but the 'vague for vagueness sake' ending will leave audiences with an empty feeling as big as the desert the movie is set in.

The DVD comes with deleted scenes, including a plotline - featuring the excellent character actor Danny Trejo, a director's commentary, a making of featurette and a combination music video/picture gallery.



- Robert Saucedo

"Versus"
Starring Tak Sakaguchi, Chieko Misaka,
Hideo Sakaki

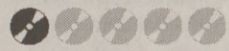
Mystery Science Theater fans rejoice. Even though the show has long been canceled, fans can still follow in the footsteps of Mike, Joel, Servo and Crow by grabbing a few friends and having a late-night showing of "Versus." For those who don't understand that, then understand this: "Versus" is a very, very bad movie. The only thing it is good for is being ripped to shreds and laughed at.

In the heart of the "Resurrection Forest," where the dead suffer from eternal insomnia, two prisoners make an escape from prison and are on their way to meet up with some gang members. The prisoners meet up with the would-be saviors only to find out that they have kidnapped a girl, and they are supposed to wait for the "Boss" to show up. Tensions escalate and before the audience knows it, a fight breaks out and one of the gang members is killed. The meaning of the resurrection forest becomes very clear when the dead gang member suddenly comes back to life in a zombie-like fashion and tries to go on a killing spree, but is abruptly stopped by loads of bullets.

Confused and scared, one of the prisoners grabs the girl and runs off into the forest in hopes of avoiding more zombies and trigger-happy gang members. Things quickly get worse as an unending supply of zombies appear along with the Boss. Through several torturous flashbacks viewers find out that the Boss and the prisoners are ancient enemies who come back every hundred years to fight each other. The Boss summons a few helpers who don't help much, but seem to be there only so the prisoners can beat on them for a few minutes. Finally the prisoners meet up with the Boss, and in a battle that goes on way too long, kills him.

All of the bad acting, bad story, bad effects and bad characters combine to make this movie a perfect candidate for Mystery Science Theater lovers. The plot is so convoluted and difficult to understand that viewers may still have no idea what happened in some cases. The acting is so exaggerated that viewers will find themselves laughing at it. On top of that, none of the characters have names. All you have is the Boss, the prisoners, the girl, etc. This is as cheap as filmmaking can get. Extras on the DVD might have helped to improve the disc somewhat, but all viewers get are four trailers that look like equally viable candidates for making this DVD a DUD.

How anyone could have produced such a remarkably terrible movie is simply beyond reason. It has no redeeming value whatsoever. It is nothing but fodder for people who like to sit and make fun of movies. If audiences are going to watch this film, grab a bunch of brutal-minded friends and start viewing around midnight; they'll be sure to have a great time. If not, they will turn it off after 10 minutes.



- Paul Cozby

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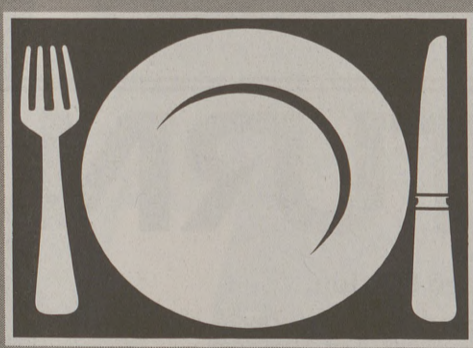
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