

Film Review: ‘Awake’: Sleeps On Its Potential

★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆

What’s so frustrating about *Awake*, the latest offering from Canadian director Mark Raso, is that it really could have been great. Its apocalyptic, part sci-fi part horror premise is solid: one day there’s a great big natural disaster, and suddenly no-one can sleep. Cue everyone being driven mad by exhaustion and paranoia as the resulting chronic insomnia drives them to hysteria, mania and for some, outright psychosis.

And on top of that, the main characters had the potential to be very compelling. Specifically we spend most of our time with Jill (Gina Rodriguez), whose daughter Matilda (Ariana Greenblatt) miraculously *can* sleep, making her a walking Holy Grail for the scientists scrambling to fix the problem. Should Jill offer up her daughter as a potentially exploitable lab rat, or should she risk humanity – including herself and son Noah (Lucius Hoyos) – but save her daughter?



It’s a classic, reverse-Dream-Lord disaster premise with a side order of the trolley problem – but one with the potential to move beyond clichés, and get really creative with its implications for both the individual and humanity. Sadly, the key word here is, of course, “potential”. *Awake* has a lot of that potential, but doesn’t do nearly enough with it.

Perhaps the film was let down from the start by its own limitations. After all, 96 minutes is a perfectly respectable runtime for an episode of *Sherlock*, but for *Awake* it was clearly inadequate. True, it’s established early on that the insomnia-based mania is setting in faster than usual because Reasons, but this just reads as a lazy excuse to get the plot moving quickly. Unsurprisingly, said plot ends up building towards its climax far too quickly, and the film feels over before it’s really started.

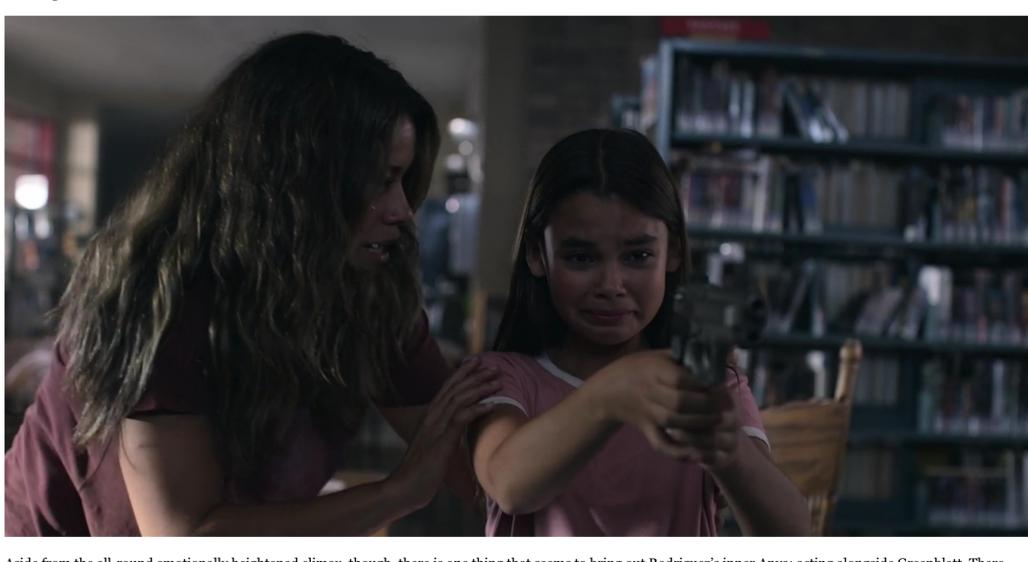
Obviously, a short-ish runtime can work: it saves underrated masterpiece *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* from dragging, for instance. But that film is set in the real-life 1990s. With *Awake*, we badly need more time than we get to get used to this not-so-brave new world that needs exploring, and to see the characters develop as they deal with its challenges. Instead, we’re barely 20 minutes in – and have only just found out that Matilda *can* sleep – before one churchgoer proclaims, “We should sacrifice her!” In other words, it’s taken less than 24 hours for humanity to go from *WTF is happening?* to *KILL THIS SMALL CHILD NOW!!!* I mean... what?

And the exposition. My god, the exposition... whatever happened to the ‘Show, Don’t Tell’ rule? Could they not have found another way to communicate all the science-y stuff besides having a scientist (Finn Jones) rattle it off, at one point LITERALLY TRAVELLING TO JILL’S HOUSE to explain something to her? Not to mention, that classic lazy writing choice: a character learning crucial information because other characters just *happen* to loudly discuss said information, while said character just *happens* to be eavesdropping. Yes, this really is how Jill gets vital info. *Twice*.



It’s not just the plot that suffers, either. Characters are introduced faster than *Elementary* suspects, and are then gone just as quickly, leaving us with barely any more information about them than we started with. Personality-wise, the film never goes beyond the standard tropes: we get a well-meaning pastor, a self-serving but redeemable convict, an evil scientist – and that’s the long and short of their characters. The latter, Dr. Murphy (Jennifer Jason Leigh, reuniting with Rodriguez after 2018’s *Annihilation*) gets the worst of this. She’s the primary antagonist, but for most of the film we don’t really get any indication that she’s bad news besides Jill (eventually) *telling* us that she is. (She used sleep deprivation to help torture prisoners of war, apparently.) Why did she do that? How did she justify it, to herself and others? How did she go from there to being willing to experiment on a child? Why was Jill willing to keep working with her post-army discharge? The film seems uninterested in answering those questions and Leigh’s performance, with its general undertone of chronic boredom, doesn’t help.

The other actors’ performances are likewise mostly unremarkable. Shamier Anderson (playing the aforementioned convict) is generally serviceable, as is Hoyos; it’s just that neither of their characters are well-written enough, or given enough screen time, become anything close to multi-dimensional. Meanwhile, Rodriguez’s performance is far from Razzay-worthy, but it’s also far from her best. A lot of the time, we’re stuck with a flat monotone voice and relatively static facial expressions, vaguely reminiscent of Kristen Stewart’s infamous performance in the *Twilight* series. True, Jill does spend much of the film slipping into a zombie-like lethargy due to that pesky chronic insomnia, but it’s hardly a great showcase for her talents. In particular, Rodriguez has experience with portraying descents into madness: she was brilliant as the increasingly unhinged Anya Thorensen in *Annihilation*, for instance. So, again – as with Stewart, who rose phoenix-like from the ashes of *Twilight* to give excellent performances in vastly superior movies – at least some of the blame for Rodriguez and her castmates’ failings in *Awake* has to go to the aforementioned poor writing and directing.



Aside from the all-round emotionally heightened climax, though, there is one thing that seems to bring out Rodriguez’s inner Anya: acting alongside Greenblatt. There, Jill’s vulnerabilities, flaws and fears all come to the fore as she desperately tries to protect Matilda, while simultaneously trying to instill the toughness that Matilda will need to survive when everyone else – including her mother – is dead. Greenblatt herself, meanwhile, surpasses the low expectations we tend to have of child actors to become the absolute star of the show. True, it helps that Matilda gets by far the most coherent are out of everyone else in *Awake*, but Greenblatt also deserves full credit for giving the role her all. Her transition from scared, naive child to tiny survivor who can make her own choices and adapt enough to potentially survive solo in the approaching post-apocalypse is genuinely believable, and when she’s terrified or tearful all you want is to reach through the screen and wrap her up in a warm hug.

A standout scene that shows the best in her and Rodriguez is when Jill, still desperate to essentially mould Matilda into a female Number Five Hargreeves, hands the poor kid a gun and tries to cajole, reason and bully her into learning to shoot it, over Matilda’s increasing panic and overwhelmed tears. It’s a heart-rending moment despite the still-shoddy dialogue, fully delivering on what sci-fi thrillers do best: combining a nightmarish scenario while exploring how ordinary humans, and their relationships, might be tried and tested in its wake. It’s what a pity that the rest of the film, yet again, fails to live up to that potential.

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