

SUNSHINE SHOWBIZ

Film worth catching

Virus-plagued thriller *Contagion* terrific, terrifying — and will make you want a shower

Seeing *Contagion* in a crowded theatre is like watching *Jaws* on a life raft. Bring hand sanitizer. Or bleach. And maybe soap and a bucket of warm water. By the time the credits roll, you'll wish you were home in a hermetically sealed bubble with its own oxygen supply.

This, of course, is the desired effect. Why else would you make a devastatingly plausible thriller about a pandemic if not to make everyone feel like their germ-ridden office phone or equally filthy neighbourhood ATM is crawling with death?

As a doctor investigating a mysterious, lethal virus that's transmitted from surface to surface, Kate Winslet points out how many times the average person touches their face in a day. Immediately, you will never want to scratch your nose again.

Never mind all the other things — railings, seats, doors — you touched on the way in. And that guy somewhere in the audience who won't stop coughing? Just put him out of your mind.

Given all of this, I can't say *Contagion* is a pleasant experience, but it is an superbly executed one — tense, hyper-intelligent, tragic, bracing and, in the end, as emotional as it is chilling.



KEVIN
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Movies

CONTAGION



1 HOUR, 46 MINUTES

STARRING

Matt Damon, Kate Winslet,
Jude Law, Marion Cotillard

DIRECTOR

Steven Soderbergh

Most impressive of all is the decision by director Steven Soderbergh and screenwriter Scott Z. Burns to not resort to the genre's sentimental or sensational tendencies. They make realism feel far more harrowing than Hollywood fantasies in which, say, the population transforms into zombies and vampires or a scowling general proves a greater threat than the microbes themselves. Here fact trumps fiction for sheer heart-thumping horror.

Contagion begins, as all epidemics do, simply: Gwyneth Paltrow is a married corporate executive, returning home to



Matt Damon is left to deal with the fallout after the outbreak of a deadly virus in *Contagion*.

the U.S. after a groundbreaking ceremony for a factory in China. But she's harbouring both a secret — she just had sex with an old flame during her trip — and flu-like symptoms.

Back home with her fam-

ily — husband Matt Damon and her 6-year-old son — her symptoms rapidly intensify. So does the film, moving forward at a dizzying clip, crossing continents and multiple plot threads: From the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention in Atlanta (run by Laurence Fishburne) to the World Health Organization in Geneva (where scientist Marion Cotillard investigates the virus's origins) to San Francisco (where blogger Jude Law is fear-mongering) to middle

America (where Winslet's doctor is desperately trying to contain the outbreak).

As Fishburne notes, the 1918 Spanish flu killed one per cent of the world's population; that's roughly 68 million people today.

Within a few weeks, public panic is as virulent as the disease itself, with Damon, who proves immune, protecting his teenage daughter as the civilized world decays into near-chaos. Yet at no point does the movie feel as improbable — or distanced — as the post-apocalyptic norm. When Damon comes across a rifle with which to guard his family, you suddenly think: Maybe a gun in the house isn't such a bad idea, after all.

Also rare? The attention paid to characterization. If usually the viruses in thrillers are more dimensional than the humans they're infecting, here an excellent cast — and Burns' ambitious screenplay — make even the lesser roles register as rich and real.

So yes, *Contagion* is terrific and terrifying. Just pray to whatever you believe in that nobody sneezes in the seat behind you.

✉ kevin.williamson@sunmedia.ca

t @KevLWilliamson

B blogs.canoe.ca/ent

"ONE OF THE BEST FILMS OF THE YEAR! RIVETING AND BRILLIANTLY EXECUTED."

Richard Roeper, REELZCHANNEL

CONTAGION



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