

Noah



A Review by Garry Hill

Produced by Darren Aronofsky, Arnon Milchan Scott & Mary Parent. Directed by Darren Aronofsky. Screenplay by Darren Aronofsky & Ari Hendel. Very loosely based on the biblical story. Photography by Mathew Libatique. Music by Clint Massel.

Length: 138 minutes. A Regency Enterprises Production. Profoza Pictures. Distributed by Paramount Pictures. Cinematic Release March 2014. Rated M Rating *** 30% Available on DVD.

CAST

Noah: Russell Crowe, *Naameh*: Jennifer Connelly, *Tubal Cain*: Ray Winstone, *Ham*: Logan Lerman, *Ila*: Emma Watson, *Shem*: Douglas Booth, *Japeth*: Leo McHugh Carroll, *Methuselah*: Anthony Hopkins. *Samyaza Leader of the Golem Watchers*: Nick Nolte. *Other Golem Watchers*: Frank Langella, Mark Margolis

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Review:

This film has been a massive commercial success and generally a critical success and this reviewer is left wondering why on both counts.

Perhaps the all star cast has something to do with it. The poster above emphasises that casting was the film's strength.

So much goes wrong with *Noah* that it is difficult to know where to start. Perhaps it would be best to start with what manages to be good about the film. The vivid, well done deluge scene works as drama, the ark itself appears as awesome and the actors do their best with strange roles. This accounts for the rating of 30%

The roles are not the only thing strange about this movie, virtually everything is. Even strange in itself is not the problem, some great movies have had a strangeness to them, but when a movie becomes unrelentingly dreary and demented and full of kitschy elements and becomes preposterous even for a fantasy, strange becomes a problem.

Over fifty years past film critic Dwight MacDonal in assessing what was wrong with filmed Biblical epics laid down five rules which would lead to a film success, He also noted that these rule were usually violated.¹ These were:

- 1 Use the original script
- 2 Avoid well known performers, especially in small parts
- 3 avoid making the past picturesque
- 4 keep it small, no swelling music, thousands of extras milling around, ect.
- 5 avoid pressure from religious pressure groups

Well *Noah* violates all five rules. Violating Rules 2 and 4 was not such a bad idea, but not following the others has led to what should have been a cinematic disaster. To start with, look at the story.

This is not the Biblical story of Noah and the flood. It uses some elements from the Bible as a rickety framework for what unfolds as a very demented phantasmagoria about a flood, an ark and a very strange group of people. Director/Co-Producer/Co-Writer Darren Aronofsky explained that he had over two hours to fill and the original story was not long enough for that.² This probably explains why we have a very wise very very very old man Methusalah turning up to give advice and portentous revelations about life just for starters. Cinematic time also goes on arguments between Mrs Noah and her husband, the argument with his daughter in law about her right to have her child and arguments between Noah and his sons. Finally there are Noah's arguments with the remaining cast, the pagans. Other additions include romantic tangles with Noah's boys and nearby pagan charmers. Even more arguments occur when Tubal Cain, the pagan leader, does what bad guys always do, try to show who is boss. He ends up stowing away on the ark so he can draw out the conflict with Noah and continue arguing. He has to

¹ Dwight Mac Donald, '*The Greatest Story Ever Told.*' A Review of the film. July 1965. Reprinted in *On Movies* 1969. New York; De Capo Press, 1981. pp 430-431.

² 'Noah' (2014) *Wikipedia*

join the cue, that is right, cue not crew, everybody argues with everybody else in this movie. Aronofsky's comments about film length do not explain why some of the most dramatic parts in the Biblical story are played down or eliminated. These include the message from God of the approaching destruction, the sending of the dove to bring back evidence of dry land, the landing of the ark on Mount Ararat and the cursing and exile of Ham. The rainbow as a sign of rejuvenation with the promise from God that he would never flood the earth again but would bring fire next time just gets reduced to the sight of a rainbow.



Noah and family note the soled shoes and generally twentieth century styles

Also cut out are two of Noah's daughters in law and the major character - God. Only Hollywood would have the mixture of audacity, arrogance, kitsch and mercenary motivation needed to do that. Only Hollywood could get away with it. Instead the supernatural elements are supplied through Noah telling us of the voices in his head and also through a circle of golem like stones that were once fallen angels. They come alive to help and inspire Noah to build the ark that will

save the good guys (Noah, his family and the animal species of the planet) and drown the bad guys. The bad guys are obviously anybody else, but what of the plant life? We see very little of it in the dreary settings filmed in Iceland's panoramic mud. Even when we do get a forest it is in the dark and in medium close up. Not since *Lawrence of Arabia* has a film worked so hard to make an audience long for verdant scenery – and then denied them. This film actually declares war on the flora by drowning it while saving the fauna. How can any life survive once the flora is gone? Not only this film but the basic story lacks logic, let alone any subtlety.

The film also lacks internal veracity. Supposedly set thousands of years ago, we get explosions just like those given off by dynamite, eighties phrases, and garments that look like imitation 1970s duffle coats from some cheap Asian factory, some with machine sewing showing. Everybody prepares for the flood with oilskin raincoats replete with hoodies and soled shoes. Emma Watson's dental fillings also show.

Once everybody is afloat the audience would assume that after the deluge things would calm down and nothing could be more demented than the destruction of the planet. Do not assume that. When Ila announces her pregnancy a horrified Noah goes into one of the most paranoid, misanthropic, megalomaniac and fanatical raves ever seen on celluloid. God and Noah are in agreement. *ALL* of the human race must be exterminated because they are evil. So why build an ark? To take care of the animals for a while? In a movie that makes most points with the subtlety of a gigantic malfunctioning flashing neon light this idea remains undeveloped. His children must be the last earthling generation. He decides to kill Ila and child, so she flees trying to find somewhere to hide - on the ark? The subsequent chase resembles something like that endured by Mia Farrow in *Blind Terror*. Meanwhile Noah's boys tell Daddy that the animals are upset. Meanwhile Tubal Cain emerges to confront Noah and in the way of Hollywood villains insists on explaining his motives in conceited self-satisfied terms. Also in the manner of Hollywood he suddenly dies when his unarmed, cornered victim overcomes him.



Noah and his rocky golem pals. The ark is in the background



Note the hoodies and soled footwear as they rush the boat

At that point the dreary paranoid kitschiness of it all left me stunned and weary. Why didn't one of the cast burst out into a jazz classic to relieve the dreary idiocy? Perhaps they did and it ended up on the editor's cutting room floor. When in the 1966 epic *The Bible: In the Beginning* director/co-star John Huston came to the flood story he hammed it up and mucked around with the animals, treated it all as fun, omitting the drowning of the world. By focusing on the animals and the building of the ark the audience could and did laugh along with Huston's Noah; that will never happen here.

Yet with a bit more effort, that could have happened here by making it into a musical comedy. Noah/Crowe could have serenaded the ark's motley cargo with 'If I could Talk to the Animals' from *Doctor Dolittle*. Ila could have sang 'Love Child' when her unborn baby gets Noah's wrath. Everybody could have sat at a table giving an in unison version of 'Sit down You're Rockin' The Boat' while Noah raves. 'Raining in my Heart' could have been the background music to the deluge. Ridiculous certainly, but so is this movie.

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