



VIRTUAL-REALITY 'THIRTEENTH FLOOR' DOESN'T PRESS THE RIGHT BUTTONS.(L.A. LIFE) (movie review)

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Coming as it does in the considerable wake of "The Matrix," the virtual worlds of "The Thirteenth Floor" can only feel like a bit of a letdown. Visually stylish with some striking retro landscapes, this movie and its innumerable ambiguities are often quite interesting, but never completely engaging.

What it lacks most is the kind of jaw-dropping moment that made Keanu Reeves - and movie audiences - so memorably murmur, "Whoa." Instead, you'll have content yourself with a "Huh."

It's not quite the same, is it?

The movie opens promisingly enough in a sepia-toned, 1937 Los Angeles where a tuxedo-clad gentleman named Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl) hands a confidential letter to a hotel nightclub bartender. Next thing we know, Fuller wakes up in a modern-day skyscraper, and we learn that the past he was visiting wasn't real - he created it on a computer. Everything in it is a virtual simulation, even the comely chorus girls that Fuller so ardently enjoys.

This trip was Fuller's last, though. He's murdered right after placing a phone call to his partner, Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko), the same man Fuller left the note for at the hotel. Hall is devastated - and confused. He can't remember where he was the night Fuller was murdered, and the fact that Fuller's bloody tuxedo shirt lies in the top of his hamper doesn't exactly bode well, either.

Rather than call Johnnie Cochran for legal advice, Hall decides to go back in time and see what his partner was doing. The lines between fact and fantasy shift back and forth (and back and forth) when Hall meets a mysterious beauty named Jane (Gretchen Mol) who may hold the key not only to Fuller's death but to the nature of life itself.

While all this may sound kind of absorbing and substantial, the screenplay (credited to director Josef Rusnak and Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez) unravels once the plot thickens. Other problems:

Wooden dialogue and bad acting (Bierko and Mol being the main culprits.)

Still, like other science-fiction entries such as ``The Matrix" and ``The Phantom Menace," ``The Thirteenth Floor" does offer some arresting visual images, particularly the period scenes in Los Angeles. We roll down Wilshire Boulevard looking at undeveloped land and oil derricks - and no traffic jams. Rusnak can't resist hammering home the present-day contrasts, inserting a shot of the city's modern, concrete-and-steel skyline nearly every five minutes.

If all of the movie's landscapes seemed as authentic as its washed-out 1930s world, ``The Thirteenth Floor" might feel a little more genuine itself. But the film's existential noodlings simply don't hold up. And here, too, it suffers in comparison with ``The Matrix," a movie that actually improves with a second viewing. Here, once (if that) is quite enough, thank you.

THE FACTS

The film: ``The Thirteenth Floor" (R; violence and language).

The stars: Craig Bierko, Armin Mueller-Stahl, Gretchen Mol, Vincent D'Onofrio.

Behind the scenes: Directed by Josef Rusnak. Screenplay by Rusnak and Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez. Released by Columbia Pictures.

Running time: Two hours.

Playing: Citywide.

Our rating: Two stars.

CAPTION(S):

Photo

Photo: Los Angeles of the 1930s comes alive via computer for Vincent D'Onofrio and the rest of the cast in virtual reality-fueled murder mystery ``The Thirteenth Floor."

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