

MOVIE REVIEW

The Boston Globe

Devil

Trapped in an elevator, but escaping clichés

By Ethan Gilsdorf, Globe Correspondent | September 18, 2010

It's a clever premise, to jam most of a movie's action into a small space. At least one filmmaker has tried this before: Hitchcock, whose "Lifeboat" placed survivors from a torpedoing during World War II into a dinghy. "Twelve Angry Men" and "Das Boot" also tackled this challenge and, to a lesser degree, "Phone Booth" and "Panic Room."

"Devil" throws down this claustrophobia-inducing gauntlet. Three-quarters of this thriller takes place in an elevator car stuck between the 21st and 22d floors of a skyscraper.

Trapped inside are five souls, a neat racial and socioeconomic cross-section of America: a mechanic and war vet played by Logan Marshall-Green ("Brooklyn's Finest"); Geoffrey Arend of "(500) Days of Summer" as a smarmy salesman; hulking security guard Bokeem Woodbine ("The Last Sentinel"); Bojana Novakovic ("Drag Me to Hell") as an innocent-seeming young woman; and a harmless old lady, played by Jenny O'Hara ("Mystic River").

From the opening sequence — upside-down aerial shots of the Philadelphia skyline — you know bad things will happen. Plus, before the elevator, we meet haunted Detective Bowden (Chris Messina of "Julie & Julia"), whose family recently died in a hit-and-run accident. A friend tells Bowden, "Your ability to forgive is going to determine the course of your life more than anything else." Naturally, we're going to see how that will play out.

Director John Erick Dowdle ("Quarantine") gives us some breathing room by weaving in the fate of Bowden, as well as ample scenes of rescue crews trying to save the victims before they kill each other. Which they begin to do.

But, as the title gives away, the plot is less "whodunit" and more "the devil made whodunit." One security guard, an amateur demonology expert, tries to convince our skeptical detective that the devil is in the details. The stuck elevator smacks of purgatory. That car wreck? It occurred on the Bethlehem Pike. With these not-so-subtle biblical nods, you know you're about to enter the morally pure universe of M. Night Shyamalan, where naughty people get punished.

"Devil" may be directed by Dowdle, but the story is all Shyamalan ("The Sixth Sense," "Signs"), the auteur of the "what the . . . ?" ending. "Devil" is the first installment of "The Night Chronicles," movies built on concepts and produced by Shyamalan but executed by newbie directors.

Despite the gimmick's potential hazard — the audience becoming squirrely — the devilry largely works. Performances are solid, the script nimble, and the plot managed to keep at least this reviewer guessing.

Here's the predictable part: We all learn a lesson about forgiveness. And we are told that if the devil exists there must also be a God. So take that, Stephen Hawking.

Ethan Gilsdorf can be reached at ethan@ethangilsdorf.com. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2010 The New York Times Company

