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Hyun-seo (Ko A-sung) and Gang-du (Song Kang-ho) in happier, less monster-stricken times

It Came From the River

Monster movie stuck in Park

THE HOST (*Gwoemul*): Directed by Bong Joon-ho. Written by Bong Joon-ho, Hah Joon-won and Baek Chul-hyun. Visual effects, Kevin Rafferty. Music, Byeongwoo Lee. Starring Song Kang-ho, Byun Hee-bong, Park Hae-il, Bae Doo-na and Ko A-sung. In Korean and English with English subtitles. Magnolia Pictures, 2007. R. 119 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Somewhere between plainly campy horror flicks and the cheery spoof of *Shawn of the Dead* lies *The Host*, a monster movie more concerned with the dynamics of its ordinary family of accidental heroes than with explaining the appearance of the titular monster. Well, beyond its reason for existing, that is: In a prologue, a concerned Korean morgue assistant is told (by his American boss, no less) to dump bottle upon bottle of toxic chemicals down the drain, which leads to Seoul's Han River.

Next to the river is the food stand and home of the Park family: Grandpa Hee-bong (Byun Hee-bong); his clumsy, possibly narcoleptic son Gang-du (Song Kang-ho); Hie-bong's sister Nam-Joo (Bae Doo-na), an ace archer with a flaw; and Hie-bong's daughter Hyun-seo (Ko A-sung), a tart child who adjusts quickly to just about anything. The family's fifth member, brother Nam-il (Park Hae-il), lives elsewhere, but quickly appears, chugging from a bottle, when things start going horribly wrong.

And of course they go wrong — the bickering, loving Parks do live right next to that broad, polluted river. But *The Host's* monster is equal opportunity; it comes ashore on a nice day when there are plenty of humans to chase about. Part *Alien* alien,

part evil merman, part T-rex (giant body, stubby arms), the monster has a Freudian maw which it uses both to swallow and regurgitate people, acrobatic skill with which it clambors gymnastically under a bridge and a nice long tail for picking up and dragging off little girls like Hyun-seo.

Even with its moments of creature feature fright, *The Host* is mostly in good humor, the unmissable commentary on environmental pollution, mass hysteria and inept governmental response to crisis included. At times, it's gleefully funny, especially early on, when inept Gang-du takes on the creature with a signpost or offers his young daughter a beer. Director Bong Joon-ho clearly likes to play with mood and tone, and when it works — the mourning family, thinking Hyun-seo dead, falls to kicking and wrestling bizarrely with each other; Hyun-seo, trying to escape the creature's lair, interrogates another young captive about what he most wants to eat when they get out — it's delicious. But for stretches, *The Host* drags its tail, relying on the audience's fondness for the Parks to get us through another capture, another monsterly regurgitation, another scene of bumbling authority. *New York* magazine critic David Edelstein wasn't wrong when he compared *The Host* to last year's dysfunctional-family offering *Little Miss Sunshine*; like that film, *The Host* has its quirky charms, but they won't win over everyone. **EW**

The Host opens Friday, March 30 at the Bijou.

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