

New Godzilla spans both sides of the Pacific

Godzilla

Directed by

Gareth Edwards

Now showing at area theaters

By Mike Street

Special to The Asian Reporter

Although its Japanese versions enjoy mega-cult status in the United States and worldwide, the Godzilla franchise hasn't translated well to Hollywood. Some of this comes from the disconnect between eastern and western film culture, and some of it from the way Toho Studios jealously guards its Godzilla character. But director Gareth Edwards may have finally struck the right balance with his recent *Godzilla*, creating a satisfying spectacle that successfully translates a Japanese classic while echoing themes from both sides of the Pacific.

Toho added scenes with, and narration from, Raymond Burr before releasing the original *Godzilla* in the United States, creating the awkward hybrid *Godzilla: King of the Monsters!* Hollywood took another 40 years to make its own version of the famous monster, 1998's *Godzilla*, directed by Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*) and starring Matthew Broderick alongside B-list stars like Harry Shearer, Hank Azaria, and Jean Reno.

The result was uneven, funny but talky, with too much conflict between characters and not enough against the monster. Created by nuclear tests in French Polynesia, not postwar Japan, this Godzilla lost both his cultural roots and antiwar subtext. The film seemed less a monster movie homage than an attempt to insert Godzilla into a typical Hollywood disaster flick.

Though not a complete flop, the 1998 film fell short enough of expectations that its two follow-up films were cancelled. Toho did not again grant the Godzilla rights to a Hollywood studio until now, to relative newcomer Edwards, in his first big-budget, and his second feature, film. This 2014 version better fuses eastern and western



EAST/WEST BLEND. *Godzilla*, the world's most revered monster, has resurfaced for moviegoers this summer. The release of the 2014 version of *Godzilla*, which was created by filmmaker Gareth Edwards, coincided with the 60th anniversary of the original 1954 *Godzilla* by director Ishiro Honda. (Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures)

Godzilla films by creating evocative imagery while sticking closer to the feel of the Japanese originals.

This fusion begins by uniting some prominent eastern and western stars, albeit as the weak characters typical of the Toho movies. Aaron Taylor-Johnson (*Kick Ass*, *Savages*) is adequate as Lt. Ford Brody, the one-dimensional hero who defends both family and country. Ken Watanabe, known in Japan for his samurai portrayals, takes an intellectual turn as lead scientist Dr. Ichiro Serizawa, providing little more than anguished exposition about Godzilla. And Bryan Cranston of *Breaking Bad* plays Dr. Joe Brody, Ford's father, his emotions ranging from heart-wrenching pain to haunted obsession, but his role is relatively minor.

To balance those thinly drawn characters, Edwards creates emotional depth with cinematography and themes reminiscent of contemporary, dramatic worldwide events. Ford Brody has just returned home from duty as a Navy explosive ordnance disposal officer, a common specialty in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and his reunion with his family early in the movie is similar to many such scenes among veterans of those wars.

Godzilla's appearance in Hawaii creates a tsunami, and the scenes of terrified victims

fleeing a wall of water through swamped city streets draws instant parallels to footage from tsunamis in Japan and the Philippines. Lastly, images of first responders rescuing victims and refugees seeking their lost families bring to mind 9/11's grim aftermath.

The real focus of the movie, of course, is Godzilla, whom we do not see in full until over an hour into the movie, but his appearance is dramatic. Just 50 meters tall in the first *Godzilla* picture, he is now twice as large, towering over the San Francisco skyline. He has all of his usual powers, from his prodigious tail to his glowing radioactive breath.

This lizard also has his roots in postwar nuclear testing, like the original *Godzilla*, providing the subtext that he is not just a horrifying creature, but one of our own devising. This *Godzilla* survives from early radiation-soaked earth, and the postwar bomb tests that were actually attempts to destroy him instead made him stronger. In the same way, the film's nuclear weapons become threats to humans, not their intended monster target. Watanabe encapsulates this theme in his one great line: "The arrogance of man is thinking nature is under our control, not the other way around."

Godzilla's disposition further displays his Asian origins. Western movie monsters are

either malevolent (think *Dracula* or *Freddy Krueger*) or, less often, misunderstood (like *King Kong* and *Frankenstein*). In his Japanese incarnation, *Godzilla* sometimes protects Japan from other monsters, a role he assumes here, unlike the 1998 version, in which the creature nests destructively in Manhattan.

This newer *Godzilla* defends the west coast against two other huge monsters, yet another element drawn from the Japanese originals. After the first *Godzilla*, in which the monster fights the Japanese military, the sequels typically pitted him against other gigantic monsters, from *King Ghidorah* to *Mechagodzilla*. Instead of merely matching him against the

military, as Emmerich did in 1998, Edwards evokes the *Godzilla* originals with a monster-on-monster showdown in downtown San Francisco.

The outcome of this battle has its own surprising twists, capping off a movie that will satisfy many more fans than Emmerich's 1998 version. Evoking cultures on both sides of the Pacific, Edwards draws strongly on *Godzilla*'s Asian roots while still creating an action-packed thriller that western audiences can enjoy, too. The film's success as the top draw so far this year has already led to news of a sequel, assuring us of more east-west monster mayhem to come.

To learn more, visit <www.godzillamovie.com>.

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