

FILM REVIEW



John Cusack, top right, stars in 2012, directed by Roland Emmerich.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES

# It's the end of the world as we know it

Armageddon is a real blast in '2012'

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

Roland Emmerich is in love with the end of the world, and, boy, does he make a spectacle of it. Without a doubt 2012 is the biggest movie to open in Taiwan this year, and not since the first *Lord of the Rings* opening in 2001 has the pre-release industry screening attracted such hordes, filling the Ambassador Theater in Ximending to bursting. It seems that Armageddon, the end of days, judgment day ... whatever you choose to call it, has enormous appeal, and on the big screen Emmerich makes it a diverting, if not exactly riveting, experience.

Emmerich is something of a virtuoso in the depiction of the end of the world as we know it, with a track record that includes *Independence Day* (1996), *Godzilla* (1998), and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). He is the master of the big set piece of elaborate CGI, improbable plot development and hectoring sentimentality. In 2012 he achieves new levels of spectacle and bombast.

The date 2012 is taken from the Mayan calendar, where it is regarded as the end of a solar cycle. In the film, this is marked by intense solar flares leading to huge shifts in the geology of the Earth. As continents sink, oceans rise and tectonic plates float about like canoes on a sea of magma, human civilization faces annihilation. The governments of the world prepare to save

what they can, from exotic animals to art treasures, and individuals selected for their genes or their wealth. A fleet of modern arks will emulate the biblical Noah, preserving human civilization from the deluge.

This is an excuse for some highly elaborate sequences in which a small band, Jackson Curtis (John Cusack), an unsuccessful novelist, his ex-wife Kate (Amanda Peet), their two children and Kate's new partner Gordon (Thomas McCarthy) discover their humanity as they make a desperate escape from California, as it sinks into the sea, and find their way to China and a place on the ark. The improbability of this human story is staggering, but Cusack, a consummate professional, throws himself into the role with great energy. This story of the little people is balanced against an even less believable plotline that features Thandie Newton as the first daughter and Danny Glover, who as the US president has some of the worst lines of dialogue in a film with a literary ineptitude that makes the *Transformers'* Optimus Prime almost Shakespearean in his eloquence.

The essential goodness of the first family is put into contrast with the heartless political fixer Carl Anheuser (Oliver Platt), for whom laudable sentiments need to be put aside when the fate of the species is at risk. It is an indication of how abrasive the treatment of

human love and conscience is in Emmerich's hands that it is difficult not to have some sympathy for this otherwise thoroughly unpleasant character. At least Anheuser isn't going to sprout the usual clichés about the dangers of losing our humanity, and he embodies, in however shallow a manner, the complexities attendant on the question of whom to save from global annihilation.

The film is not without its moments, with some mildly amusing jokes scattered about to liven things up, and a lively performance by Woody Harrelson as a conspiracy-obsessed indie radio operator, who, not very surprisingly, is the only one who has the whole Noah's Ark escape plan sussed out. It is somewhat hard to get away from Sony's rather aggressive product placement, with the US Navy and the White House clearly using only that company's products.

2012 has some bigger CGI effects than almost any picture before it, but there is nothing that is notable for its newness or ingenuity. It is easy to be bowled over by the scenes of collapsing tower blocks or trains flying into the abyss. These pack a massive punch, but the film shows off no new moves, and despite its size, it is likely to slip unobtrusively out of sight, rather as California does in the film, after a few months of obscenely high box office takings.

Film Notes

2012

DIRECTED BY:  
ROLAND EMMERICH

STARRING:  
JOHN CUSACK (JACKSON CURTIS),  
AMANDA PEET (KATE CURTIS),  
CHIWETEL EJIOFOR (ADRIAN HELMSLEY),  
THANDIE NEWTON (LAURA WILSON),  
OLIVER PLATT (CARL ANHEUSER),  
THOMAS MCCARTHY (GORDON SILBERMAN),  
WOODY HARRELSON (CHARLIE FROST),  
DANNY GLOVER (PRESIDENT THOMAS WILSON)

RUNNING TIME:  
158 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Antichrist

As a married couple (Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg) make love, their child plummets to his death. Then, as they retire to the countryside for therapy, the pair descend into psychological, physical and sexual violence amid surreal images and a doom-laden atmosphere. Excoriated by his enemies and lauded by a number of respected critics, this exorcism of director Lars von Trier's own psychological demons is for those who want to see him inflict even more damage on the bodies of his two actors than Roland Emmerich did on world landmarks in 2012. By the way, if you think glimpsing Dafoe's testes in this softer version of the film (as opposed to the "hard" version screened at Cannes) is worth the price of a ticket, then be warned: Taiwan's censors have sharper scissors than those used on the female character's private parts. Gainsbourg won Best Actress at Cannes for her role.



Best of INPUT 2009

Representing the International Public TV Screening Conference (INPUT), Taiwan's Public Television Service (PTS) is showing some interesting material that challenges assumptions of TV programming. Screening at the Kaohsiung Film Archive from today to Sunday and at the Eslite Xinyi Bookstore in Taipei from Dec. 4 to Dec. 6. Entry is free but seating is limited. The Web site is at [bestinput.pts.org.tw](http://bestinput.pts.org.tw).



Exit Speed

It's DVD promotion time again with this action flick starring Lea Thompson, who had a previous generation of young male moviegoers on side with appearances in *Back to the Future* and *Howard the Duck*, and who has been doing a lot of TV work since. This is a more rigorous, violent outing, however, as a demented biker gang attacks a busload of passengers in the middle of nowhere. Starts tomorrow at the Baixue theater in Ximending.



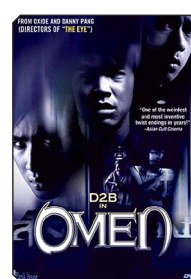
Tokyo Desire

Also at the Baixue from tomorrow is this Japanese oddity from 2004, an erotic fantasy by prolific veteran director Mamoru Watanabe, who has made this kind of "pink" film since the late 1960s. A young woman is infatuated with the husband of a relative, and — to the detriment of the morals of all involved — an opportunity presents itself when he moves in nearby, but first she must dispose of her rival. Watanabe is nearly 80, so if anyone knows how to give this scenario a new hook, it's him.



Omen

Three young men (played by a Thai boy band called D2B) find their lives under increasing threat after an accident leads to an encounter with an old woman who seems to know what the future has in store. This mild Thai horror film from 2003 started last Saturday, and today is likely the last day it screens, so for those who simply must see every work by writers Oxide Pang (彭順) and Danny Pang (彭發), rush to the Baixue now.



FILM REVIEW

## Empire of the rising sun

'Pattenrai' tells the story of the Japanese engineer whose projects turned an arid wilderness into one of Taiwan's most important agricultural regions

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

There is nothing intrinsically reprehensible about getting nostalgic for lost empire, but in these days of post-colonialism, the robust imperialistic sentiments expressed by *Pattenrai*, a Japanese animation about the building of the Chianan Canal (嘉南大圳) and Wushantou Reservoir (烏山頭水庫) by the Japanese occupation government in the 1920s, seem a little out of sync with the times.

The film has had considerable pre-release publicity, with a screening last week in Tainan attended by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and another earlier this week in Taipei for former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) and other political figures. This is part of an effort to have the reservoir and canal recognized as a World Heritage Site, but also serves to highlight the somewhat ambiguous relationship that Taiwan has toward Japan.

Fortunately, *Pattenrai* need not be viewed exclusively through the prism of nationalist ideology or post-colonial political correctness, and as an inspirational story of a visionary engineer who put the interests of people in general before those of nations, it is certainly affecting and informative.

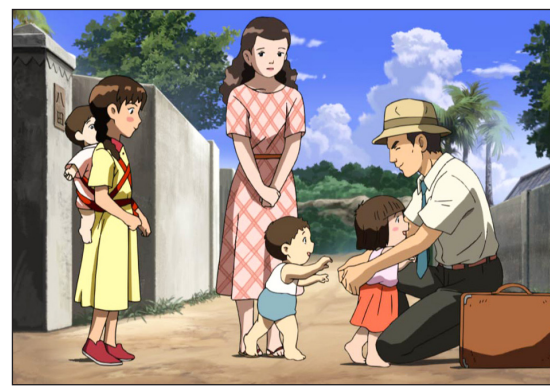
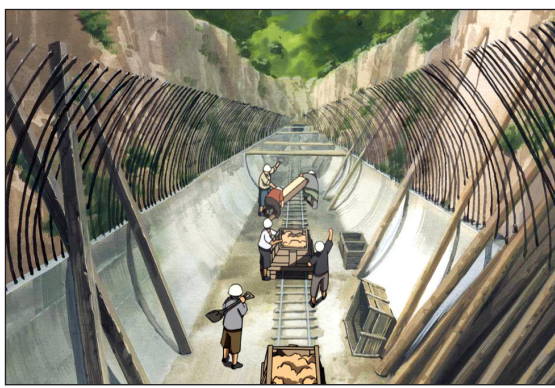
The hero of the tale is the

Japanese engineer Yoichi Hatta, who while stationed in Taiwan conceived the hugely ambitious plan to irrigate the Chianan Plain (嘉南平原), turning it from an arid wilderness into one of the island's most important agricultural regions. The story is told from the point of view of two children, Chin-yi (進一), the son of a Japanese administrator, and Tianwen (添文), the son of a local farmer. Tianwen's father violently opposes the reservoir project and sees his son's participation in it as useless tampering with the natural order, despite the backbreaking daily work of transporting irrigation water by bullock cart.

Tianwen, initially hostile to Hatta, becomes intrigued by the possibilities of engineering and decides to follow Hatta to become an engineer. Hatta is shown as a man who, in his commitment to his profession, is indifferent to race, fighting shortsighted Japanese bean counters as well as stick-in-the-mud Taiwanese peasants to achieve his goal.

*Pattenrai* can be seen as a paean to the greatness of science, which in the hands of a man like Hatta transcends the boundaries of nations and works for the benefit of all mankind. This sermon to science is balanced with a bit of emotional

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SKY FILMS



Film Notes

PATTENRAI  
八田與一  
— 嘉南大圳之父

DIRECTED BY:  
NOBORU ISHIGURO

WITH THE VOICE OF:  
TONG CHI-WAI (湯志偉) AS YOICHI HATTA

RUNNING TIME:  
90 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: MANDARIN AND  
TAIWANESE WITH CHINESE  
SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

drama. There is an explosion that kills both Taiwanese and Japanese personnel, including Chin-yi's father, and almost derails the project. *Pattenrai* has no doubts that while the price of success is high, the benefits are undisputed. As a film to teach children about the power of science and dedicated

application to study, *Pattenrai* is perfectly adequate, nicely mixing its preaching with a story of childhood friendship and of youngsters trying to break out from under the shadow their parents. While simple, the story is tightly structured, and shows the assured hand of director Noboru Ishiguro, who is best known for his work in fantasy anime.

Hatta remained in Taiwan for 28 years developing water conservancy infrastructure, including 10 years working on the Wushantou Reservoir. His contribution and dedication to his profession are undisputed, and that his memory should be celebrated is certainly commendable. That it should be in a Japanese production, however, rather than a Taiwanese one, leaves a slightly odd taste in the mouth.

The subsequent history is touched on in text notes at the end of the film, which briefly outline Hatta's death in the Philippines during World War II and his wife's suicide soon after the Japanese surrender — she drowned herself in the reservoir her husband built rather than face repatriation to Japan. But these tragedies are secondary to the debt that Taiwan owes to the vision of a man who saw the island as a stage on which his engineering genius could be expressed.