

The Wages of 'Fears': Will Audiences Want This Movie After 9/11?

By Rene Rodriguez
Knight Ridder Newspapers

When production began early last year on "The Sum of All Fears," the latest Hollywood adaptation of a Tom Clancy bestseller, the filmmakers' biggest worry was whether audiences would accept Ben Affleck replacing Harrison Ford as CIA agent Jack Ryan. Now, with "Fears" due in theaters on Friday, the Affleck-Ford question has become a trivial matter. Today, the real question hanging over "Fears" is whether the events of Sept. 11 have made the movie's once-unthinkable premise - terrorists detonating a nuclear bomb on U.S. soil - too much of a downer for audiences looking for escapist summer entertainment.

"We probably wouldn't have made this movie after Sept. 11," admits Affleck, who keeps an apartment just eight blocks from the World Trade Center site. "But I'm glad we did make it before, because the attack is presented and shot in a way that is not exploitative, and it's eerily prescient in terms of the way the media would cover an event like that and we the citizens would react."

"There's no doubt in my mind Sept. 11 changed the whole movie: It went from being a spy thriller to a drama that affects audiences differently now," he adds. "That's the result of a seismic shift of the entire country's perspective that happened on one day. It's a remarkable, strange thing to have the whole world change in a day. It's a

legacy and a perspective we're all still dealing and living with, and I certainly don't pretend to know what everybody's ready for, what's appropriate or what the right thing is. But I also don't think entertainment, by definition, has to be mindless and fluffy and stupid."

Written in 1991 during the waning days of the Cold War, Clancy's novel envisioned a ragtag crew of Palestinian extremists, German radicals and even a Native American convict detonating a nuclear bomb during the Super Bowl. The ensuing series of misunderstandings between the United States and the Soviet Union pushed the two countries to the brink of the apocalypse, underlining Clancy's message about the importance of global nuclear disarmament.

The film adaptation, written by Paul Attanasio and Daniel Pyne and directed by Phil Alden Robinson ("Field of Dreams," "Dreams, Sneakers"), retains the basic structure of Clancy's book, although it jettisons many of the subplots of the 900-page novel and even reimagines its lead character. After Ford, who had played Jack Ryan in two earlier Clancy adaptations ("Clear and Present Danger" and "Patriot Games") decided to pass, the filmmakers cast Affleck in the role and just pretended the earlier Clancy movies never happened, with Ryan in his 20s, a low-level CIA consultant at the start of his career.

The identity of the terrorists was also changed to a group of European neo-nationalists hoping to topple the existing super-

powers, then assert themselves in the ensuing aftermath. But the bulk of the book - including the Super Bowl bomb, smuggled into the country inside a cigarette vending machine aboard a freighter - remains intact. Unlike most thrillers, in which the hero correctly chooses to cut the green or red wire as the clock ticks down, "Fears" offers no such last-minute rescue.

Ensuing scenes of Affleck running through a devastated Baltimore, with buildings aflame and hospitals filled to capacity, do more than bring back unpleasant memories of Sept. 11. They prey on fears stoked by government advisories warning of new terrorist attacks, like Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's statement earlier this week that terrorists are sure to eventually acquire nuclear, chemical and biological weapons - "and they will not hesitate to use them."

A thriller about terrorists armed with nuclear and biological weapons is nothing new for Hollywood, of course. In "True Lies," Arnold Schwarzenegger prevented Arab terrorists from nuking downtown Miami (although they did detonate a small bomb in the Florida Keys). In "The Peacemaker," George Clooney and Nicole Kidman kept New York City from being blasted to bits with only seconds to spare. And in "Executive Decision," Kurt Russell and Steven Seagal fought terrorists who hijacked a 747, armed it with a nerve gas bomb, and headed for Washington, D.C., intent on causing mass destruction.

The difference between those

movies and "Fears" isn't just timeliness: It is also that the scenario in "Fears," which was scrupulously researched by Clancy and presented with the same amount of realism in the film, is also frighteningly plausible.

"What's alarming about this movie is that there's no longer anything in it that could not be brought to reality," says Chase Brandon, a 25-year veteran of CIA field operations who now serves as film liaison to the agency's Office of Public Affairs. "We are dealing with an adversary now who has an unprecedented level of intelligence, resourcefulness, diabolical planning, scheming, reliance on technology with covert communications and high-tech ways of networking around the globe. It makes them as formidable in their way as we would like to think we are in combating them. When they are dedicated in striking us, they are probably going to get through some time."

In the wake of Sept. 11, Hollywood studios scrambled to avoid further injuring the nation's psyche. Two films scheduled for release last fall - the Schwarzenegger vehicle "Collateral Damage" and the comedy "Big Trouble" - were bumped to 2002 because of terrorist-themed content. Other movies still in production, like "Men in Black II" (which originally concluded at the World Trade Center) or "Bad Company" (the Chris Rock-Anthony Hopkins comedy about a terrorist threat) went into re-shoots.

But unlike those films, "Fears," long scheduled for a Memorial Day 2002 release, pro-

ceeded as planned.

"There was no way we couldn't stop and think, 'Boy, I wonder how this is going to affect people's reaction to the movie,'" says Rob Friedman, CEO of Paramount Pictures, which is distributing the film.

"But there was never a sense of panic. We were very cognizant to not exploit the situation in any way, shape or form. We haven't hidden the fact that the nuclear explosion occurs in the film, because it would be detrimental for someone who might be overly sensitive to that situation to walk into the theater unsuspecting. And I think the filmmakers

follow his characters as they react to the explosion.

It's tempting to assume the blast sequence was trimmed after Sept. 11, but Robinson says it was shot that way.

"After Sept. 11, we had not yet designed some of the computer-generated shots that show Baltimore from a distance after the explosion, and the only thing I did was to tell the special effects people to make sure they didn't show any buildings that looked like the Twin Towers," he says. "I wanted to make sure it didn't look we were trying to use imagery from Sept. 11 to juice something up."

One-Act Play Festival Begins June 6

CSUH News Services

The Cal State Hayward Department of Theatre and Dance will present its "Xarc Festival of One Acts," plays produced and directed by advanced theater and dance students and supervised by Edgardo De La Cruz.

Bill A of the assortment of one-acts will begin on June 6 at 6 p.m. in the Studio Theater and will include pieces from "Fiat," by Joe Pintaro, directed by Michael Ryker; a modernized version of John Gassner's "Everyman," directed by Lisa Dokken; "Poof!" by Lynn Nottage, directed by Dawn Monique Williams; and "Act Without Words I," written by Samuel Beckett, directed by Tim Ferreira. Bill A also will be performed

June 8.

Bill B, the second part of the festival, will be staged on June 7 at 8 p.m. and June 9 at 2 p.m. and will include short performances of "Under My Skin," an art piece developed by Brandon Harrington; "A-video-ant Garde," based on short plays by Tadeusz Kantor and directed by James Cooney; "At the End of My Universe," written and directed by Tony Cogley; and "Gentleman's Island," by Joseph Horowitz, directed by Sheba Howerton.

Tickets for shows are \$8 General, \$6 seniors and Youth and \$5 for CSUH students. Persons wishing ticket information may call (510) 885-3261 or visit the box office from noon to 4 p.m. during performance weeks.

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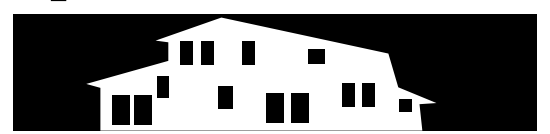


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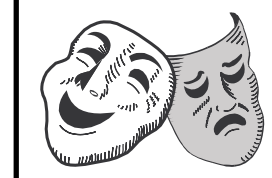
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