



'Rampage': Film Review



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THE BOTTOM LINE

Plays to its strengths while winking at its weaknesses.

OPENS

4/13/2018



Brad Peyton's monster movie stars Dwayne Johnson and Naomie Harris as scientists confronting gigantic, genetically modified predators.

Upping the disaster quotient after their collaboration on 2015's *San Andreas*, Brad Peyton challenges Dwayne Johnson to battle not one, but three massive, mutated, mad-as-hell monsters wreaking havoc in the videogame adaptation *Rampage*. The distinction, of course, is that unlike *San Andreas'* killer earthquake, these aggressors are intentionally targeting human civilization.

By now it's pretty apparent that Johnson has the ability to transform into almost any type of character, as long it's a large and muscular one. Scorpion King, helicopter-flying firefighter, jungle-trekking archaeologist, uber-lifeguard, ex-football player (that's for real, though) or Polynesian deity, Johnson has played them all. So impersonating a scientist for *Rampage* seems almost a demotion in stature, until it becomes clear that like some hero of an ancient myth, he'll have to confront these demons alone in single combat.

Whatever character he's playing, though, there's no denying Johnson's abundant charisma and brawny brand of self-deprecating humor. So even if this is fairly mindless popcorn

entertainment, The Rock's unfailing enthusiasm and poise should help Warner Bros. deliver solid domestic returns, while internationally *Rampage* could see an even stronger response.

It helps that the filmmakers provide primatologist Davis Okoye (Johnson) with a badass backstory as a onetime special forces officer and former wildlife ranger to help establish his credentials. On one of his African enforcement patrols, Davis rescued juvenile albino gorilla George after poachers killed his mother. Now an adult sheltered at a San Diego wildlife conservation park, George (mocap-acted by Jason Liles) is first and foremost Davis' best friend. Their relationship is about to be sorely tested by people more interested in exploiting animals than protecting them, however: siblings Claire (Malin Akerman) and Brett (Jake Lacy) Wyden. Directors of Energyne Corporation's Project Rampage, they're attempting to bio-engineer super-sized, super-aggressive predators and "weaponize" their DNA, whatever that's supposed to mean.

When an experimental gene-splicing lab aboard a secretive Energyne space station explosively disintegrates, the debris crashes to earth in the San Diego wildlife sanctuary, along with a sample of the company's powerful pathogen. Curious, George investigates, inadvertently inhaling the toxic gas and transforming overnight into a nine-foot-tall super-gorilla. Former Energyne geneticist Dr. Kate Caldwell (Naomie Harris) realizes what's going on as soon as she hears news reports about the gargantuan gorilla and warns Davis that George will continue growing uncontrollably before becoming lethally aggressive.

Once the pseudo-scientific background involving gene-editing techniques that produce oversized animals has been dispensed with, it's about time for some monster mayhem. After George tears down the veterinary lab, his tentative rampage gets cut short by shadowy government secret agent Russell (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), a syrupy-sweet-talking, pearl-handled-pistol-packing, aw-shucks Southern gentleman type, who tranquilizes George and loads him onto an air transport. When the mega-ape regains consciousness aboard the air freighter, all hell breaks loose and before long he's gone AWOL big-time, setting off on a mysterious and destructive quest to reach Energyne's headquarters in Chicago.

If *Rampage's* disaster scenario represents classic B-movie material, the filmmakers don't seem at all concerned about appearances; in fact, they up the ante with another gigantic predator, a 30-foot wolf with incredible speed and agility that's on a potentially devastating collision course with George. Before you can say "kaiju smackdown," another monster materializes, along with the potential for a thrilling three-way confrontation.

As the trio of aggressors, loosely based on the *Rampage* videogame (now a Warner Bros. property), advance on Chicago, it takes some time for the action sequences to fully engage, but from about the movie's midpoint, Peyton delivers a succession of staggering set pieces. He's skillfully supported by DP Jaron Presant and the superior VFX team at Weta Digital, allowing him to get the cameras close on the genetically modified animals and in particular George's expressive features.

Although their spectacular clashes provide most of the movie's visual thrills, the escalating conflict between George and Davis remains the principal narrative dynamic, as Davis attempts to leverage not only his scientific training, but also his emotional reserves to deal with George's toxic rage. One of the central premises of a Dwayne Johnson action movie tends to be the conceit that his characters are physically capable but emotionally limited. *Rampage's* four screenwriters provide an additional twist by showing Davis opening himself up with George through their shared sign language while he remains stubbornly distant from the people around him.

Johnson pulls this relationship off with grace and humor, affably accepting that it will inevitably make him the target of any number of jokes at his character's expense. The downside of his performance, however, may be that he appears to be just too capable. Whether it's interspecies communication, helicopter piloting or weapons handling, Davis doesn't leave much space for anyone else to shine.

One thing he can't match, though, is Dr. Caldwell's technical experience, which could offer the key to rescuing George. In an underwritten role, Harris capably suggests Caldwell's expertise and implacable determination to defeat Energyne's nefarious bio-engineering

plans. Both of them face a formidable foe in agent Russell, and Morgan plays the loose-cannon federal agent for all he's worth, delivering a hilariously over-the-top, tongue-in-cheek performance that nearly steals every one of the scenes he appears in.

The likelihood that the *Rampage* movie will be reverse-engineered to produce a videogame is probably already a foregone conclusion, so the only question is whether it will arrive before the likely sequel that's set up in the final scene.

Production companies: New Line Cinema, Wrigley Pictures, F.P.C., 7 Bucks Entertainment

Distributor: Warner Bros.

Cast: Dwayne Johnson, Naomie Harris, Malin Akerman, Jake Lacy, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Joe Manganiello, P.J. Byrne, Marley Shelton, Jason Liles

Director: Brad Peyton

Screenwriters: Ryan Engle, Carlton Cuse, Ryan J. Condal, Adam Szykiel

Producers: Brad Peyton, Beau Flynn, John Rickard, Hiram Garcia

Executive producers: Marcus Viscidi, Dany Garcia, Dwayne Johnson, Jeff Fierson, Toby Emmerich, Richard Brener, Michael Disco

Director of photography: Jaron Presant

Production designer: Barry Chusid

Costume designer: Melissa Bruning

Editors: Jim May, Bob Ducsay

Music: Andrew Lockington

Rated PG-13, 107 minutes

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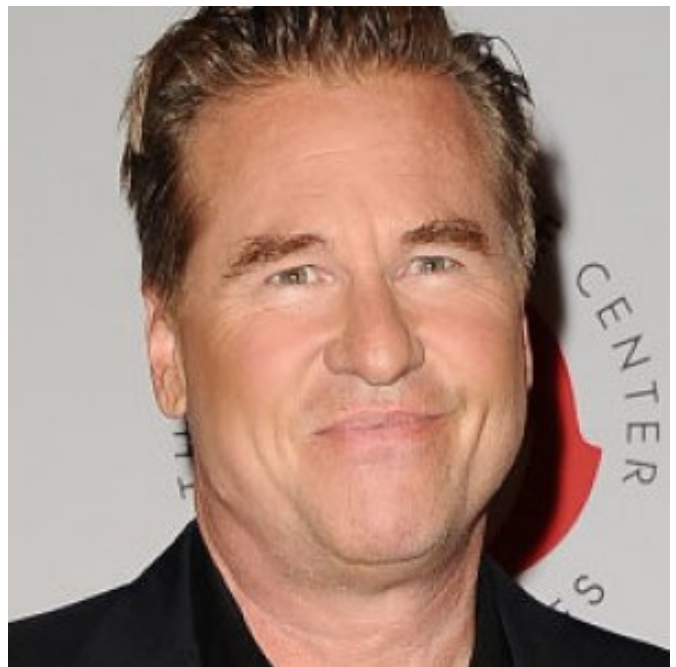
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