

Plenty of faults with 'San Andreas'

By Joe Mathews

After sitting through the new earthquake movie "San Andreas", I experienced my own dark seismic fantasy: as the Big One hits California, a giant hole opens up under Burbank, and Warner Bros. disappears into it forever.

I had been prepared by advance publicity for Warner's "San Andreas" to be a dumb film full of pseudoscientific nonsense about earthquakes. But "San Andreas" is much worse than that. The film is so profoundly cynical and callous that to call it reprehensible might be too kind.



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I am not talking about the nonsense spewed onscreen about chasms and tsunamis that are life-and-death subjects in many parts of the world. My main beef with "San Andreas" is its treatment of California and its people. It trivializes the loss of human life and offers thinly disguised contempt for us Californians, who are portrayed – with few exceptions – as foolishly panicked, cowardly or corrupt.

Then there are the glossy lead characters, who – amidst indescribable tragedy – talk mostly about themselves and their relationships. They also do a lot of kissing and – call me a prude – show off considerable cleavage as two cities are

destroyed and tens of thousands of people perish around them.

For those lucky enough not to have seen the film, it stars Dwayne Johnson – the artist formerly known as The Rock – as a Los Angeles Fire Department rescue helicopter captain. After the first of a historic earthquake swarm hits L.A., this public employee ignores millions of suffering Angelenos who pay his salary to save his estranged wife from a skyscraper. Since she is played by the wonderful Carla Gugino, I was willing to cut him some slack. But then, after rescuing her, the couple – without a second thought – abandons my devastated city to fly to San Francisco to find their daughter.

The film portrays California as many very rich people here see it – two cities, Los Angeles and San Francisco – with not much else of importance anywhere else. We learn nothing of lives lost along the San Andreas between those cities – no tears are shed for the Central Coast, or even San Jose. A brief scene in Bakersfield is mainly an opportunity to slur that city's people, who – just minutes after a great disaster – are devoting their energy to looting.

Our self-involved protagonists arrive in San Francisco by jumping out of a stolen plane and into AT&T Park, allowing Johnson to quip inappropriately – in the midst of disaster – that it'd been a while since he'd taken his wife to second base.

In the City by the Bay, no one can think straight in the panic – except two young brothers, who, in keeping with the anti-Californian bias of the movie, are British.

Then, just minutes after a tsunami destroys what was left of San Francisco after the earthquakes, the older British brother and Johnson's daughter do some kissing.

Who knew mass casualties were such a turn-on?

Yes, it's true that over the last century Hollywood has

destroyed parts of California to create moments of cinematic wonder. Hollywood filmmakers seem to like portraying their neighbors as expendable folks, whose extinction can be enjoyed by worthier Americans in the heartland.

But “San Andreas” feels especially cruel, particularly in the way it ignores the victims. (In contrast, at the end of the classic 1936 film “San Francisco”, the people get to march arm-in-arm back into their earthquake-ruined city as they defiantly sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”). There is also a whiff of political ambition amidst the film’s cynicism. When I was covering Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hollywood friends of his told me that “San Andreas’” star Johnson – The Rock – was patterning his career after Schwarzenegger – from a muscle business (wrestling) to action films, comedy, philanthropy – and eventually, maybe politics.

That seemed crazy at the time. But now comes a movie where Johnson plays the hero in a calamity. Johnson even concludes the movie by promising, in gubernatorial tones, “Now we rebuild.” Even in this stinker, you can smell what the Rock is cooking.

The ugly truth is that “San Andreas” isn’t the only evidence of Hollywood’s contempt for its home state. The entertainment industry summoned all its influence to secure \$1.6 billion in state tax incentives over the past five years. The money is supposed to bring back to California big-budget productions like “San Andreas”, which was filmed mainly in Australia. But putting taxpayer money into movies like this is horrifying, particularly when the state has more pressing needs – including billions in seismic retrofitting for buildings and infrastructure.

At least the timing of “San Andreas” is good. The awful film, arriving during state budget season, makes a convincing case for stripping Hollywood of those tax incentives, and putting the money into rebuilding our state.

Joe Mathews wrote this Connecting California column for Thinking L.A., a project of UCLA and Zócalo Public Square.