

Review: 'Commuter' is no ordinary train ride

By Howie Nave

I think we can all pretty much agree that Liam Neeson is an exceptional actor with range, but it wasn't until "Taken" that Neeson became an exceptional action star with an extraordinary appeal. Not a super hero mind you no, but someone with that everyman kind of appeal that is instantly relatable.

There's also something about a dramatic movie whose stage is shot almost entirely on that of a moving train. You know there's no easy escape and you soon find yourself as one of the passengers on the train.



The thing is, do you belong on that train? Such is the premise of Neeson's latest outing in "The Commuter." Neeson plays 60-year-old Michael MacCauley, an insurance salesman who, for the last decade has been taking the same commuter train from his home in the New York suburbs to his work in Manhattan. Director Jaume Collet-Serra (who worked with Neeson on the movies "Unknown," "Non-Stop" and "Run All Night") creates an almost "Groundhog Day" routine showing Michael's daily routine getting up every morning

for work with his wife (Elizabeth McGovern) dropping him off at the station and wondering how they're going to stay above water affording to pay for their son's college tuition mortgaging the house. You know, everyday scenarios that life

throws at you. Michael's a good family man and lives a pretty non-exciting, ordinary life.

Then the dominoes start to fall. He loses his job and realizes he has no back-up plan because he lost all of his fortune in the Great Recession of 2008. You can feel his helplessness; a man at the age of 60 having no major savings plan (come to think of it this hits rather close to home). Not wanting to upset his wife he doesn't tell her because life as he now knows it is pretty much at a standstill. He drops by a local pub after getting canned where he meets an old friend, Murphy (Patrick Wilson) who's a cop. In fact, it turns out Michael used to be his partner before leaving law enforcement to go the insurance route. The movie doesn't explain why he took this career path, but will serve him well later as things unfold. After a few drinks Michael heads for home getting back on the commuter train.

You realize watching the movie at this stage that the good stuff is about to happen because once that train is in motion things are about to get anything but routine and ordinary. You know the adage that if something is too good to be true, it probably is? Well, that gets tossed out by the wayside when a mysterious woman named Joanna (Vera Farmiga) takes a seat across from him on the train and strikes up a conversation. Michael just assumes she's hitting on him and he reminds her that he's happily married. She doesn't want to have sex with him but makes him a proposition nonetheless. There's a total of \$100,000 waiting for him in a package in one of the train's lavatories and all he has to do is find someone on the train named Pryne who is carrying a bag and plant a tracking device on that bag.

Joanna gets off at the next stop and Michael now has a moral dilemma to deal with because once he crosses that line there is literally no going back. He finds the money and it seems almost too easy. She's off the train so why not just skip with the money and be done with it? Wrong. Things amplify at this

point because she is now monitoring his every move and strangers in and off the train are watching him. Oh, did I mention that if he fails to go through with her proposition that his family will be murdered?

It would be too easy to call this movie “‘Taken’ on the Train” but in some respects that’s exactly what it is as things start to unravel. Neeson followed a similar plot in the movie “Non-Stop” but that was set on a commercial plane. I know, it sounds at first like a tried and true formula, but it’s a winning one because the plot here in “The Commuter” doesn’t give you a clear-cut answer where you feel “taken,” that you know what is going to happen next.

Credit the storytellers (Byron Willinger, Philip de Blasi and Ryan Engle) for not making it too easy to connect the dots and for making Neeson’s character one you immediately like and cheer for. There’s been so many movies that I feel insulted as a moviegoer. There have been movies where the whole story is told just in the trailer giving us characters that you could care less what happened to them. Truth be known I tend to go for complete escapism in my movies because for a couple of hours I don’t want to see what’s going on in the outside world on the big screen. That’s why I’m sitting here in this theater: to escape my life in the real world and implant myself in another world happening on that big screen and in this case on a train. Oh, and I want to add too that the action sequences on this train are pretty intense. I haven’t seen this much drama on the railroad since Denzel Washington and Chris Pine in 2010’s “Unstoppable.” If this movie is a huge hit at the box office for Neeson, expect to see a sequel but it won’t run as long time-wise because the plot this time will take place nonstop on a bullet train.

“The Commuter” is rated PG-13 for some intense action/violence, and language and clocks in at a tight 105 minutes.

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