The Impossible: A narrow view of a major disaster

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Directed by Juan Antonia Bayona, written by Sergio G. Sánchez, María Belón

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was one of the worst natural disasters in history. More than 230,000 people were killed when a 9.2 magnitude earthquake originating off the west coast of Sumatra sent waves as high as 98 feet slamming into 14 countries in the region, including Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, India and Sri Lanka.

Inevitably, the poorest were the hardest hit. Thousands of lives could have been saved if a detection and warning system had been in place in the Indian Ocean prior to the massive earthquake and the tsunami that followed.

The Impossible, directed by Juan Antonia Bayona, is the account of one British family's experience caught up in the carnage and destruction of these events. The story begins as Maria Bennett (Naomi Watts), her husband Henry (Ewan McGregor) and their three children, Lucas, Thomas and Simon, fly to an expensive beachside resort in Khao Lak, Thailand for their Christmas vacation.

In the opening scenes, the family explore the beautiful vacation spot. Flying lanterns are lit at night and color the deep blue skies. The resort's occupants enjoy the beautiful weather and each other's company. But nature's vastness, the ocean and the skies, loom ominously over the figures and a sense of dread pervades the atmosphere.

The next day disaster strikes and devastates the tranquility of the ocean-side idyll. The onrush of the first wave comes with terrible force and instantly engulfs everyone and everything in sight.

Maria and Lucas, initially separated, eventually cling to one another while wading through dangerous debris and powerful currents. Maria sustains a terrible wound from a tree branch that rips apart the flesh on her leg. The two survive, unsure if the rest of the family is alive. They are eventually rescued by local people who act with great generosity and take them to a hospital. Life and death commingle in the rescue efforts, with dead or injured bodies all around.

People speaking multiple languages from various countries attempt to communicate amid the chaos of the overwhelmed hospital. Children have been separated from their parents, many of whom have probably died. Maria's wound festers and is graphically depicted. Meanwhile, Henry, Thomas and Simon are safe elsewhere. Henry sends his sons along with another survivor for safekeeping, as he goes in search on his own for Maria and Lucas.

The rest of the film consists of the family members' efforts to find each other, in which they succeed after a series of dramatic twists and turns. The plot moves along toward its inevitable conclusion in a rather contrived and heavy-handed manner.

While the story is an extraordinary one and there are genuinely affecting scenes, much of *The Impossible* strikes one as artistically insincere and insular. Emotions are often in high gear with a very narrow focus. The images, dialogue and music strain to induce strong feelings in the audience as well. A colossal social tragedy is artificially reduced to the story of one family's improbable survival.

Naomi Watts and Ewan McGregor are both talented performers, and they do their best, but the work is often overwrought and melodramatic. The immediacy of the tsunami is portrayed with technical virtuosity in the beginning, but little is added to the viewer's understanding of the event.

A disaster of this scope should be understood in an artistically serious manner. Instead, filmmakers often seem all too comfortable portraying a single family's struggle for survival, or its emotional journey. The results are often sentimental and banal. The marketing tagline for *The Impossible*, rather predictably, is "Nothing is more powerful than the human spirit." Surely, there is more to

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say.

What happened in 2004? Was the tsunami's destructive impact inevitable? In the film, the frailty of human beings is contrasted to the immensity, inscrutability and unpredictability of nature. This differs little from the shallow approach of the mass media to such events.

The tsunami was a not just a natural calamity. It was also a social disaster that exposed a lack of social planning on an international scale. Scientists had warned of such an event well in advance and nothing was done to prevent it. Worse, the scientific infrastructure necessary for disaster management in the Indian Ocean region was nowhere to be found.

The disaster also revealed the indifference of the governments of the wealthiest imperialist nations to the plight of the poor. President George W. Bush was vacationing in Texas and did not comment on the catastrophe until three days later—even as millions of ordinary people around the world expressed their sympathy and immediately offered to contribute financially. Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, for his part, was getting a tan on an Egyptian beach, oblivious to the goings-on.

The White House offered $15 million initially, which drew international derision. In response, US authorities raised the amount to $350 million. Bush and Blair were overseeing a bloody neo-colonial war in Iraq that cost an estimated $9 billion a month, dwarfing the size of the aid to the tsunami victims.

A truly compelling and engaging film about such an event could not simply stay on the level of the immediate facts, in the manner of superficial, "human interest" journalism. It would have to present a more all-sided picture, including the horrific impact of social negligence and bureaucratic incompetence on an unprecedented scale. An enduring artistic rendering of a catastrophe such as the 2004 tsunami would require, in short, a greater understanding of the larger social forces at play.

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