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Escape from New York - Blu Ray Review

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EFNY.jpg

In my eyes Escape from New York has to stand up there with the sci-fi classics. Writer/director John Carpenter has quite a list that fall into the classic category, starting with Dark Star and going on to Halloween, The Fog, The Thing, Starman, Big Trouble in Little China and They Live. Escape from New

York wasn't the first film to bring John Carpenter and Kurt Russell together, they'd previously made 'Elvis' together in 1979, but this marked a significant change in direction for Kurt, from the clean-cut all-American boy next door who starred in quite a few Disney movies, to rough, tough action hero.

Escape from New York takes us into a possible future (future for them at the time as it's set in 1997) where Manhattan island has been turned into one huge maximum security prison. Crime has escalated out of all proportions so a wall is erected across the bay and prisoners are dumped onto the island and left to fend for themselves, no guards, no cells, just anarchy and survival of the fittest.

In the world portrayed the Soviet Union still exists along with the threat of world war III. The president of the United States (played by Donald Pleasence) is on his way to a peace summit with the Soviet Union and China when his plane is hijacked by a militant opposed to the government. In an attempt to kill the president the hijacker crashes the plane into a building in the middle of Manhattan Island. Unfortunately for her, the president is safely secured in an escape pod that survives the crash, but he's quickly found by the, somewhat unsympathetic, locals.

EFNY1.jpg

The NYPD police commissioner, Bob Hauk (Lee Van Cleef) mounts a rescue, but on arriving at the crash site and locating the escape pod, finds the president gone. In a stand off with the locals the authorities are told to leave and not to come back, otherwise the president dies. With another large scale rescue out of the question, Hauk tries another, more subtle tack. Just about to enter the prison is the notorious 'Snake' Plissken (Kurt Russell). A highly decorated ex-special forces soldier turned criminal, Snake is 'persuaded' to enter the prison, find the president and bring him and some vital information on nuclear fusion out in one piece. For his services Snake is offered a full pardon from his crimes, but he's also given a strict time limit. He has only 24 hours before the summit is over and the president is useless.

To infiltrate the prison covertly Snake has to fly a stealth glider in. As extra motivation for Snake, and to stop him from flying off into the distance, he's injected with tiny little explosive charges, just big enough to open the arteries in his neck. If he comes back with the president on time the explosives will be neutralized, if not then it's certain death.

After successfully landing the glider on the roof of the world trade centre, Snake finds an almost post-apocalyptic world. Burnt out buildings, rubbish strewn streets and a world run by gangs. Some relatively civilized, but some have gone feral, living in the sewers and coming out at night to scavenge for food. After meeting a few of the local inhabitants, Snake finds out that 'The Duke' (Isaac Hayes), the self-proclaimed ruler of Manhattan, has the president and plans on using him as a bargaining chip to get the prisoners released from the hell they live in.

EFNY3.jpg

With the few allies he gains along the way Snake must find the president, rescue him along with the information in the president's possession and escape across a bridge covered in land mines. What's the big problem?

As mentioned earlier, this is a classic, iconic film. By today's standards, the action is small scale and the pacing a bit slow, but for its day it represents top value. Escape from New York didn't have a huge budget, but due to a massive fire in East St Louis in 1976 they had access to entire streets of burnt out buildings to give that authentic post-apocalyptic look they were going for, that just couldn't be achieved on a back lot. Kurt Russell was Carpenter's first choice for Snake, but the studio wanted either Charles Bronson or Tommy Lee Jones. Sticking to his guns Kurt took the lead and created the now iconic Snake Plisskin that we know and love. Apparently Kurt's main inspiration for Snake was Clint Eastwood in the spaghetti westerns. The gruff manner and voice suited the anti-hero Plisskin, such that I can't imagine it being played any other way, by any other actor.

The extended cast is filled with great actors, Donald Pleasence, Lee Van Cleef, Ernest Borgnine and Harry Dean Stanton. The only major role held by a relative novice was 'The Duke' played by Isaac Hayes. Thankfully the role didn't really require great acting talents, just a menacing presence, which Hayes manages to pull off.

EFNY2.jpg

There are some negative reports of the picture quality of this Blu Ray circulating around the internet, but this is the best the film has ever looked for home movie enthusiasts. On comparison with the special edition DVD in my collection, the Blu Ray is a significant improvement in the areas of colours, contrast and picture quality. This is a film that was largely shot in dark, murky conditions but the contrast here is excellent. The biggest improvement is in the sound department though. We're treated to two excellent surround tracks, one perfectly good Dolby Digital 5.1 and for those with the right equipment to decode it, an excellent DTS HD track.

The Blu Ray extras are worth a look as well, the commentary with John Carpenter and Kurt Russell is informative and the two manage some good banter. There's a short documentary that's also very informative with interviews with the cast and production team giving an insight into how the film was made. There's a very frank interview with John Carpenter about his career to date which is well worth a look for fans of his films. Other than that there are some trailers included as well as the original opening of the film.

For fans of the film it's well worth upgrading from DVD to Blu Ray. The picture isn't reference quality, but then it was released in 1981. This Blu Ray is the best the film has ever look and sounded and contains some good extras.

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nice review Kirk, I have to buy this although no blu-ray for me yet :(

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Cheers, PS3s are coming down in price mate, you know you want to!

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