

Absurdity deflates thrilling premise of 'Next'

Contributed by Tim Riley
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NEXT (Rated PG-13)

In his abbreviated life, science fiction author Philip K. Dick was all too prolific in cranking out a plethora of novels and short stories that could fill several library shelves. A writer with this amount of talent is inevitably tapped as a source for feature films. Dick's novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" was the basis for the hugely successful "Blade Runner," starring Harrison Ford, which was released in 1982.

Sorry to say, but it has been essentially downhill since then for other film adaptations of the Philip K. Dick catalog. The execrable "Paycheck," starring the ever-annoying and untalented Ben Affleck, was a debacle.

Now, unfortunately, the capable Nicolas Cage turns in a listless performance of a sad-eyed magician with an extrasensory talent in "Next," based on Dick's short story "The Golden Man";

What's supposed to be an exciting science fiction thriller in "Next," a race against the ticking clock on a nuclear bomb set to level Los Angeles into one giant parking lot, is a laughable exercise in sleight of hand one finds in dime store magic tricks.

As a matter of fact, Nicolas Cage's Cris Johnson is a laconic magician working a seedy Las Vegas nightclub act in front of bored drunks and lost souls. To spice up his languid character, he goes by the stage name of Frank Cadillac. His hidden talent is an ability to see two minutes into the future, something that comes in handy on the job and also picking up extra cash at the blackjack tables.

"Next" gets off to a decent start when Cris is hounded by casino security for working a perceived illegal system, and while discreetly trying to leave the gaming tables the action really kicks into high gear when Cris foils an armed robbery only to become the suspect himself.

Using his visionary powers, Cris executes evasive action from the casino goons, and then steals a car and ends up in a thrilling chase from every squad car within a five mile radius of the Golden Nugget. After a dazzling elusive maneuver involving a speeding train, Cris winds up in a chop-shop run by his buddy Irv (Peter Falk channeling the dark side of Columbo).

Convenient to a plot that starts leaking worse than an old roof in a Midwest thunderstorm, everyone starts noticing that Cris isn't just performing low-rent parlor tricks. Tough, hard-nosed FBI agent Callie Ferris (Julianne Moore), who could probably put Bruce Willis in a headlock, is eager to tap into Cris's brain in an effort to thwart a terrorist group's planned attack on Los Angeles with a suitcase nuke.

Not accustomed to pleasantries, Callie puts a full-court press on the reluctant Cris to join forces with the Feds to back-channel through the right portals to change the present and avert nuclear holocaust. For his part, Cris is not the sort who earned any merit badges with the Boy Scouts, and he would sooner decline an invitation to help his fellow countrymen.

What Cris has on his mind is the constant vision of a beauty that will show up at a magical hour at a rundown Vegas coffee shop. As a result, Cris prefers to hang out at the counter nursing a martini, waiting for the propitious moment.

Fortunately, the vision of loveliness soon appears in Liz (Jessica Biel), a part-time teacher, and Cris uses his powers in the movie's funniest scene to test out several scenarios for the perfect "meet-cute" scenario. This particular situation may recall Bill Murray's endless attempts to get it right in "Groundhog Day";

Acting more like a stalker than a love interest, Cris hooks up with Liz for a drive from Vegas to Flagstaff, Arizona, where they hole up in the Cliffhanger Motel. Room service arrives in the form of the Callie's squad of feds, and also the terrorists inexplicably show for a preemptive strike.

Now it gets difficult to make logical sense of what is going on. Even more baffling is that the terrorists, in what is apparently misguided political correctness, are mostly speaking French, but they are not Algerian nationals.

More mysterious is the undeveloped motive for the villains. We don't know if they are holdovers from a French equivalent of the Red Brigades or Eurotrash recruits into the ranks of al Qaeda.

Honestly, my interest in the whole convoluted business waned early on. To be sure, there are some great car chases and collisions. The assault on the hideaway at the Port of Los Angeles is good for some climactic shootouts.

But then more than a few preposterous things occur that serve to undermine whatever remaining shred of credibility might have remotely saved "Next" from sinking into a swamp of absurdity. In the end, the best thing you can say is that Ben Affleck didn't have the starring role.

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