

Fire is the only star

Towering Inferno features group non-acting

By PAUL WASSMAN

Water, Air, Earth and Fire. The four elemental forces to primitive man. With the release of *The Towering Inferno*, we now have a disaster film for each and the series is completed. Unfortunately, Hollywood is not likely to see the harmony in this formula and *The Towering Inferno*, or the San Francisco Barbecue as I choose to think of it, is not the end to the current rage for holocaust, destruction, mayhem and general hubbub.

With enough glitter to make a Rhine Maiden envious, *The Glass Tower*, pride of San Francisco, is officially dedicated amidst a gala social pseudo-event. The ribbon is cut and all 138 stories of the monolith are illuminated to the gasps of the admiring throng, no doubt

causing a brown-out all the way to Portland. Applause ringing in their manicured ears, the builders, contractors, politicians and guests head upward for the Promenade Room, hovering over the San Francisco skyline.

The plot sickens. Builder William Holden had needed to cut costs. Son-in-law Richard Chamberlain installed electrical hardware that didn't meet specifications and the overland of *The Glass Tower's* brilliant debut sparks the fire.

From this point, the viewer is taken on a roller coaster ride of compounding disasters with scarcely an opportunity to munch his popcorn or toss his cookies. Stairwells are destroyed in gas explosions, elevators hang by shredded cables and just too many human

shishkabobs take flaming swan dives from great heights. For me, at least, the sight of the twelfth person exploding into flame did not lose its appalling effect. The suspense of wondering who would be next cost many fingernails.

Towering Inferno is a co-operative effort between 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros. This may set an interesting precedent for the future financing of big films. The film is produced by Irwin Allen. What can I say? After bringing us such television gems as *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *Time Tunnel*, and *Lost in Space*, he graduated to the big time with *Poseidon Adventure*. The director of the film is John Guillermin but the action shots bear the touch that only Allen can give. However, the film is not without its entertaining aspects. The obligatory human melodrama inserted between disasters provides touches of comic

relief. And of course, there are the stars.

Paul Newman, the architect responsible for the skyscraper, and Steve McQueen, the indefatigable fire chief, provide the best entertainment by continuing their offstage rivalry and trying to eclipse each other with feats of derring-do. Faye Dunaway looks pretty and untouched by it all. Jennifer Jones is engaging. Richard Chamberlain is greasy and loathesome. Roberts Vaughan and Wagner are suitably plastic. A bright spot in the cast is Fred Astaire, who treats us to a dance step or two, charms his way through the film and survives, legend intact. On the whole, the film is an example of group non-acting. One gets the impression that the stars had nothing better to do that day and were eagerly anticipating the cast party.

Although the melodrama, the cliches and the non-acting make a sincere attempt, they do not destroy the impact and importance of the central character — the fire.

The film was made with the co-operation and guidance of both the San Francisco and Los Angeles Fire Departments. In this respect it is an education in survival. You may never find yourself in a capsized ocean liner or a crippled 747. It is unlikely that you will be trapped by an earthquake. But a fire in a high-rise is an ever-present albeit underplayed possibility anywhere. The film indicts the high-rise mentality — biggest is best and to hell with safety. It indicts the architecture of expediency and underscores the fact that we are building cities of grandiose deathtraps. Facts which are brought home with stifling realism and spectacular special effects. And this alone justifies the film.

Finally, to cap the film and give us a moral to munch on as we leave the theatre, Newman is sitting with Dunaway at the foot of the smouldering ruin of his grand design. "I dunno," he says. "Maybe we just oughta leave it like that, as a shrine to all the bullshit in the world." He's got my vote.

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