

National Post

Ampersand

Film Review: Tornado Alley (3 stars)



Tornado Alley

Giant Screen

Chris Knight Mar 24, 2011 – 5:46 PM ET | Last Updated: Mar 24, 2011 6:03 PM ET

Every great science documentary needs the right narrator. Sometimes form follows function: *Star Trek*'s Leonard Nimoy has narrated many a space doc; so, too, Patrick Stewart. Often, sheer enthusiasm wins the day, as with Tom Hanks' work on *The Pacific* and *Magnificent Desolation: Walking on the Moon*.

If all else fails there's always Morgan Freeman, whose numerous recent projects include the TV series *Through the Wormhole*; *The Eastwood Factor*, about his buddy Clint; the upcoming nature doc *Born to Be Wild*; and even a bit narrating Alec Baldwin's dreams in the opening of the Oscars.

Finally, there's what might be called narrator stunt casting. Bill Paxton is an inspired choice to talk us through *Tornado Alley*. His quavering baritone can convey foreboding and tension with just a hint of hidden reserves of panic. He also starred as a storm chaser in the 1996 movie *Twister*, which provides a nice symmetry.

Tornado Alley follows two teams of storm chasers on their rounds. One is a workaday crew from VORTEX2, the cleverly acronymed Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes EXperiment, whose fleet of trucks bristle with radar, LIDAR and those swirly things that measure wind speed.

The other is Sean Casey (also the film's director), whose eight-year mission has been to film a funnel cloud from the inside. Imagine if Dorothy had had access to Imax cameras.

To this end he has built a Tornado Intercept Vehicle, or TIV, which resembles a cross between a submarine and an armoured car. (It also bears a weird resemblance to the post-apocalyptic all-terrain vehicle in the cheesy 1977 sci-fi flick *Damnation Alley*.) With its top speed of 160 kilometres per hour, the plan is to get in the path of an oncoming twister, hunker down and hold on tight.

The VORTEX crew are an altruistic bunch of meteorologists who hope their storm measurements will one day add precious seconds to warning times in tornado-prone areas. Casey's is a more daredevilish quest of dubious scientific value. On their own, neither team could carry this 40-minute film, but together they offer just the right mix of rationality and madness. (Just like Paxton in *Aliens*.)

We learn something about what causes tornados to form, and watch stunning footage of their birth, as skies darken to inky blackness and wispy tendrils of proto-funnel clouds dance in the air like wraiths. When hail the size of golf balls starts to fall, and the filmmakers capture the eerie spectacle of spooked cows walking backwards, it seems like nature has turned inside out. For the storm chasers, it's a perfect day.

Tornado Alley opens at the Ontario Science Centre's Omnimax theatre on March 25. If you go, pair it with the centre's Nature Unleashed exhibit, which examines tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes. The exhibit runs until May 1.

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