



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on November 21, 2010

The Next Three Days

The Next Three Days is the "other" film this weekend. You know, the one without teenage wizards running around. This movie, directed by Paul Haggis, features Russell Crowe as community college professor John Brennan, struggling to hold his family together in the face of hope-murdering odds: his wife, Lara, has been accused of murder and sentenced to life in prison; their young son, Luke, is struggling with the absence of his mother; and the legal bills are piling up with bankruptcy looming on the near horizon.



Crowe brings a charming, child-like optimism to his role that is vital for the quixotic nature of not only his character — but that of the story, which even contains a reference to Cervantes' quintessential work during a discussion between Professor Brennan and his college students. The reference to Don Quixote provides a broader context to the story and the actions taken by the characters on the screen. John Brennan, like Quixote, is idealistic to a fault, and like Quixote this idealism gives him a tenacity that belies his average-joe looks and life.

He knows his wife is innocent, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, as well as the opinions of friends and family. He knows neither she nor he nor their young son can bear a life separated by bulletproof glass, iron bars, and prison guards. So, when the appeals process is exhausted, he takes the next logical step — he decides to break his Dulcinea out.

Brennan contacts Damon Pennington, played by Liam Neeson in a cameo appearance, a weathered ex-con who has made a career as a free man writing books about his time in prison. Pennington has also escaped from prison — seven times. It is this fact in particular for which he is hunted down by Brennan. Pennington gives him advice on how to break out of prison. He also informs Brennan that the most difficult aspect of a prison break, and the one that ultimately made Pennington turn himself back in, is life on the run — the feeling that someone is always watching, or about to break down the door.

However, Brennan is undeterred, and the rest of the film hinges on the success or failure of his seemingly chimerical endeavor.

One of the more interesting aspects of the movie is that Brennan is a nobody — which is to say he is like everyone else. He is the proverbial everyman. He is not an ex-CIA operative, a mad genius, or a super hero. He's just a man with a vague idea of a plan who, as he goes about planning his wife's escape, seems to avoid getting caught almost in spite of himself. One never gets the sense that he is completely in control of the situation. This of course increases the thrill for the audience, as there is always the feeling that Brennan could finally have made that final mistake by which he will be caught.

Haggis, who also penned the script, deftly captures both the thrill and the quixotic absurdity of an everyman attempting to break his wife out of prison. I do, however, wish that Haggis had resisted the temptation to show us Lara's guilt or innocence for certain. Crowe's character, after all, has no source of certainty other than his faith in his wife and his knowledge of who she is as a person. Elizabeth



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Banks, as Lara, is warm enough to keep her sympathetic but cold enough to make the certainty of her innocence murky at times. This is a source of dramatic tension that Haggis could have taken better advantage of. That said, *The Next Three Days* is still entertaining.

The film is rated PG-13 for violence, drug material, language, some sexuality, and thematic elements. Those thematic elements for which parental guidance is necessary include the main premise of the film. There is no doubt that Crowe's character is meant to be the hero here, and the lengths to which he goes to break his wife out of jail — or indeed, the idea of breaking anyone out of jail for any reason — pose a moral conundrum that is likely over most youngsters' heads. If parents do allow their younger teens to watch the movie, it will be up to them to decide how to help their children decipher Brennan's actions from a moral standpoint.

Make no wizard wands about it. This weekend's box office is certainly to be taken by what is one of the last films in the juggernaut [Harry Potter](#) series. That said, *The Next Three Days* is a nice alternative for anyone who wishes to escape Potter mania this weekend.



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