

Movie Review: 'Pirates of the Caribbean - At World's End'

by *David_Elliott*

Compact the title of "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End" to its acronym - "PC: AWE" - and the message is clear. It seems PC (piratically correct) to feel some awe.

'PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN' - Stellan Skarsgard and Orlando Bloom cross swords in combat in 'Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End.' CNS Photo courtesy of Stephen Vaughan. The first "Pirates" (2003) was like a barnacled jamboree of improvisation. The second (last year) sagged from sequel indulgence and a murky, mid-series plot. The third film is a startling cascade of climaxes, too long (shy of three hours), but to complain about excess in such an exuberant bonanza is like complaining that Gibraltar has too much rock.

Reputedly costing more than \$300 million, which by arc of inflation puts it at the "Titanic" level, the latest and maybe last "Pirates" doesn't hit an iceberg. It does have a wonderful shot of a Chinese junk sailing among 'bergs, and among the gorgeously digital shots achieved by effects wizards and cinematographer Dariusz Wolski is one in likely debt to "Night of the Hunter."

We see all the budget on screen. The costumes alone are an empire of splurge. A tighter edit would be nice, but too much of a mostly good thing can be fine for this sort of extravaganza.

Director Gore Verbinski and the writers sail free of the torpid second film, plotting an amusing, zig-zag course to a pirates' summit meeting and a big battle near a typhoon maelstrom. It includes surely the first wedding ever held as pirates, marines and monsters eagerly slaughter one another.

Capt. Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) is like a master mascot. "You add an agreeable sense of the macabre to any delirium," chirps Sparrow, haughty and preening and tipsy by nature. Depp wears his stardom so lightly that Sparrow not "getting the girl" is acceptable, even witty as the camera gazes upon the carved cheekbones and sun-gilt thighs of Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Swann, who also can be a toughie.

Against odds, Verbinski keeps the whole thing buoyant and fun. He swerves from comedy (even farce) to pathos (notably Jack Davenport as gallant Norrington), from theme park thrills to antic, cartoonish madness. The screwball momentum favors gaudy villains like Geoffrey Rush's superb pirate rascal Barbossa, Bill Nighy's tentacled Davy Jones, Chow Yun-Fat as a Singapore menace and Tom Hollander as prissily vicious Lord Beckett.

You could feel a bit sorry for Orlando Bloom, sort of a he-man brick while Depp primps and teases like a sea sprite. But the plot has a big surprise for Bloom, who grows into it. He may never be Burt Lancaster in "The Crimson Pirate," yet Bloom blooms well, and as a slinky sea witch Naomie Harris also expands, like Eartha Kitt chasing Moby Dick.

This is a voyage on salty but carbonated seas, and something always comes along to dazzle our attention. Briney mutations abound. Gorgeous maritime shots suddenly melt by magic into a desert, with Sparrow turning cuckoo in the fabled Bonneville Salt Flats. A mob of crabs hauls his ship across dunes.

There are so many grotty faces and bilge-rat teeth and poxed complexions that crisp British uniforms stand out like stiff Martians. But much of "PC: AWE" is strikingly beautiful, even as effects pile up digitally. At best, the movie achieves a compulsive merge of the real and the virtual that becomes comically surreal (forget this is comedy and you're lost).

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Pauline Kael once described a macho movie as being like a cannon in her lap, firing at her face. Some similar aggression arises at the biggest and best "Pirates." But you can laugh at being the target - the cannonades rake you with a jolly, tickling rhythm.

A Buena Vista Pictures release. Director: Gore Verbinski. Writers: Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Stuart Beattie. Cast: Johnny Depp, Geoffrey Rush, Keira Knightley, Orlando Bloom, Bill Nighy, Tom Hollander, Naomie Harris. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 1/2 stars.

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