

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "THE GUARDIAN"

Film overboard! All hands on deck! Arrr, too late! This "Guardian" seems destined to sleep with the fishes. When the only upside to two-and-a-quarter hours of a sloggy, loggy swimfest are the oceanic rescue scenes, then it's time to call in a captain, any captain, be it Kangaroo, Crunch or Hook, to perform the requisite burial at sea.

The picture opens with the camera taking the audience on a dive down to the watery depths. A voiceover intones the legend of an otherworldly being who lives beneath the sea, who whispers words of strength to men who have fallen overboard and are in immediate danger of drowning. Something gauzy and pale floats into view, undulating at the bottom of the ocean – maybe it's white or beige? No? Perhaps a light yellow? Holy mother of pearl! SpongeBob, is that you?

O, for a drop of maritime good times. But nautically naught. The plot in a conch shell: heroic Coast Guard rescue swimmer Ben Randall (Kevin Costner) is grieving over the loss of his crew in a life-saving attempt gone bad. He is reassigned to a teaching position at "A" School, the Coast Guard's elite rescue training program in Alaska. His class of wetsuited wannabes includes smug student swimboy Jake Fischer (Ashton Kutcher). The teacher and the student clash. The neoprene gloves come off. Fins fly. But ultimately, they get along – swimmingly.

Director Andrew Davis seems to have spent far more effort creating the action scenes in his super-duper wave-making tank than developing a water-tight drama. As for pace, a half hour before the end of the film, aka 20,000 Hours Beneath the Sea, he gives us four long establishing shots of snow, a mountain, a big boat and the Coast Guard headquarters. Is he kidding? Between the duller-than-dishwater direction, and a screenplay by Ron L. Brinkerhoff that should have been written in disappearing ink, it's hard to decide who deserves a court-martial more. Though the filmmakers throw in Buoy meets Girl, the love scenes between Kutcher and Melissa Sagemiller border on the amateur, with Sagemiller expressing all the emotional life of an anchor. Even the superb Sela Ward as Costner's wife can't act her way out of this one to save her life.

And then there's poor Kevin Costner. Is he suffering from a lack of water retention? Between "Waterworld" and "Message in a Bottle," is it possible the cablegram never reached him? "Ahoy, Costner! SOS: Stay Off Seas!" There must be something in the saltwater that turns the Deep into his own personal Waterloo. (One wonders what would have happened to the box office of "The Titanic" if it had been a Costner film.) Which

isn't to say that this actor hasn't done well, including his solid work in last year's "The Upside of Anger." Though he gives a strong, likeable performance, and does his "Guardian"-like best to throw his co-star a rope, Costner can't rescue Kutcher. Not in this bloated vehicle.

Kutcher plays a young man who is determined to honor his dead peers by training to save others. Based on this premise, why portray the character as a cocky upstart who's only in the Coast Guard for his own glorification? Why make it a plot point that he has to learn how to play nice with his teammates? Hello? Screenwriter? Anyone home? Or have you gone fishin'?

Speaking of lost at sea, the training class sports a sassy blonde played by Shelby Fenner. Then suddenly, with no explanation and not unlike Keyser Soze's "poof!" she's gone. Impressive—but only if this film were taking place in the Bermuda Triangle.

Movies dealing with the drama of the sea can be fascinating. But with "The Guardian," even the Coast Guard is in over its head.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: C-

Production Credits: THE GUARDIAN Directed by Andrew Davis Written by Ron L. Brinkerhoff
Cast: Kevin Costner, Ashton Kutcher, John Heard, Sela Ward, Melissa Sagemiller Rated: PG-13
Running time: 135 minutes Grade: C-

The Screen Savor: "All Seaz'd Up"™ by Kimberly_Gadette