

"Troy" Plays Like Greek Bedtime Story: Also, "Touching the Void"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 18 May 2004 18:00

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TROY

About 100 minutes into *Troy* – director Wolfgang Petersen’s and screenwriter David Benioff’s *very*

loose adaptation of Homer’s
The Iliad

, which details the events leading up to and during The Trojan War – there’s a battle sequence that gives the audience a true rush.

Having pushed the Greek armies away from the city, the Trojan forces, standing from a hilltop, begin shooting flaming arrows toward their enemies; the arrows, however, only come within a hundred feet of the Greeks, plop into the sand – still aflame – and seem to have no effect other than illuminating the beachfront. You can practically hear the Greek armies asking, incredulously, “What was the point of *that*?” They soon have their answer. The Trojans then roll a series of tangled-brier boulders – they look like eight-foot-tall tumbleweeds – down the hill, and when these boulders run over the flaming arrows, they burst into flames, creating enormous fireballs that ravage through the flummoxed Greek armies, incinerating everything in their path. It’s an awfully good action sequence – surprising, scary, and funny in equal measure.

Now I have no idea if this scene exists in Homer – my recollections of the Cliffs Notes are spotty – but thank God it exists in *Troy*, because aside from this sequence, and a late-film *mano a*

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mano

between Brad Pitt's Achilles and Eric Bana's Hector, and the brief scenes featuring Peter O'Toole,

Troy

is a drag, a soulless middlebrow epic that thinks it's Art. (The female wailing and keening on James Horner's soundtrack suggests the second coming of

The Passion

.) It's Petersen and company's attempts to turn a complex, detailed Greek tragedy into a "classy" Hollywood blockbuster, like

Gladiator

, and while it's no embarrassment – Homer's basic outline gives the movie a strong structure – it's lumbering and heavy-spirited, too-obviously cast and even-more-obviously written. It's a movie you know you're

supposed

to like – the film wears its lofty intentions on its sleeve – yet, when the lights come up after nearly three hours, you're really just relieved to escape the theatre.

As Achilles, the warrior who many believed was part god, Pitt is so impossibly buff that it barely matters how inadequate his performance is; who cares about acting when your leading man looks like *that?* (Brad Pitt seems almost *designed* to confuse the hell out of straight men in the audience.) Yet when he's not in combat, Pitt is a morose, detached presence with one of those unplaceable quasi-British accents that actors of minimal resource employ for period films, and he's matched by the sullen Bana, who proves his charisma-free portrayal in

Hulk

wasn't an aberration. (Perhaps trying to compensate, Brian Cox and Brendan Gleeson overact outrageously as Agamemnon and Menelaus.) The film's acting props, almost by default, go to O'Toole, with his haunted red eyes and careful calibration of the film's events; he's engaged in the drama when no one else seems to be. (Even Orlando Bloom doesn't help matters; his Paris is a generic fool in love, though it is amusing when this Man Who Was Legolas finally goes into action with a bow and arrow.)

But *Troy* could probably have survived even less inspired performances had Petersen and Benioff given any indication of what all the actions onscreen *meant*. Despite the lucidity of the story – again, thank you Homer – you couldn't care less about whether the Greeks or the Trojans emerge victorious; you just find yourself waiting for more exploding fireballs and the sight of Brad Pitt becoming airborne while driving a spear into a bruiser's neck. With the film's awesome production design and detail, there's no denying that the movie's \$200-million budget is all there on the screen (although I wish that price tag could have bought some more expressive cinematography), but they're pretty pictures in a vacuum;

Troy

is less Greek tragedy than Greek bedtime story.

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TOUCHING THE VOID

In 1985, two British mountaineers, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, made a trek to the Peruvian Andes, where they attempted to scale the face of the 21,000-foot Siula Grande, a feat which had never before been pulled off successfully. So begins *Touching the Void*, a half-documentary, half-re-enactment of this perilous endeavor, currently playing at the Brew & View. From the start, we might assume that we know exactly how this film will play out; traditional mountain-climbing narratives dictate that the mountaineers will initially face their challenge with pluck but will confront seemingly insurmountable hardships on their long journey to the top, before finally standing, victorious, at the peak. And so it comes as something of a shock when, less than 20 minutes into the movie, Simpson and Yates (played by actors Brendan Mackey and Nicholas Aaron) find themselves at the mountain's summit, embracing each other in relief and taking in the spectacular Peruvian view. That's when director Kevin Macdonald, through interview footage with the real-life Simpson and Yates, shrewdly drops the information that 80 percent of mountain-climbing accidents actually occur on the way *down*

. Sure enough, during their descent, Simpson winds up shattering his leg, and while he's being lowered down the mountain by his partner, a slip causes Simpson to be left dangling off the edge of a cliff, hovering 80 feet over a crevasse. Yates, realizing there was no way to retrieve Simpson, and feeling himself slipping due to the added weight, then makes a harrowing decision: He cuts the rope, and lets his partner fall. Then the drama *really* begins.

As *Touching the Void's* terrifying adventure is recalled by Simpson and Yates in present-day interviews, we know throughout the film that the two men will survive their ordeal, but that information has no bearing on the movie's escalation of suspense. (In the James Bond or Indiana Jones movies, for instance, or a true-life drama such as *Apollo 13*, we know full well that our heroes will inevitably triumph; it's the "How?" that provides the tension and excitement.) Macdonald, whose résumé includes *One Day in September*, the riveting documentary on the terrorist attacks at the 1972 Munich Olympics, stages the re-enactments with blistering realism – not until the end, with a barely alive Simpson

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hallucinating from dehydration and pain, does Macdonald engage in any sort of visual experimentation – and the editing is marvelous; you might find yourself wincing and sucking in your breath at the duo's more nerve-racking experiences. As an added bonus, the real-life Simpson and Yates recall their tale with an engaging simplicity that reveals the film's greater themes without moralizing: What are our responsibilities to those whose lives are entrusted in us? What risks will we take for self-preservation? How do you continue living after feeling that you've already died?

Touching the Void

, an extraordinary hybrid of documentary and drama, forces you to confront those questions while never skimping on the qualities that make for thrilling cinematic adventure; it's one of the year's finest achievements.