

Coasting: "The Guardian," "Jet Li's Fearless," and "Open Season"

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE GUARDIAN

If I were trapped in the middle of a violent storm, and drowning, and being rescued by a member of the Coast Guard, I would hope that my savior was just like Kevin Costner in *The Guardian*

- someone stalwart, sincere, and able to convince me that everything was going to be all right, even when he was shouting at me.

If I'm watching a *movie* involving this exact same scenario, though, I'm sorry - Kevin Costner is just about the *last* person I want to see, at least given his performance in director Andrew Davis' Coast Guard drama.

It's not that Costner's *bad* - he isn't. And it can be argued that his being a figurative ocean of calm in the movie's tense, aquatic rescue scenes is just right for his heroic character here; when dealing with thrashing, desperate souls under unimaginably frightening circumstances, Costner's trustworthy cadences would seem to be just the thing to assuage the fears of those he's rescuing. Yet unfortunately for *The Guardian*, those cadences don't change when Costner's *not*

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in hero mode, and the way his character has been designed, they desperately *need* to.

In the movie, Costner plays Ben Randall, the grizzled Coast Guard veteran who teaches cocky young upstart Jake Fischer (Ashton Kutcher) a thing or two about selflessness and duty, and who learns a thing or two about himself in the process; it's our umpteenth amalgam of "the best parts" of *An Officer & a Gentleman* and *Top Gun*, with that serio-touching "mentor" angle thrown in for added gravitas. (Costner's presence makes it okay for older audiences to be seen attending an Ashton Kutcher movie.)

However, in the script's conception of him, Randall is also supposed to be a bit of a wreck. His single-minded career focus having already cost him his wife (Sela Ward), Randall washes down pain pills with healthy swigs of booze, and in his role as a Coast Guard instructor, he torments his charges and drops them from the training program with little provocation; Randall, for long stretches, is *meant* to be something of a monster. But, in scene after scene, Costner's countenance never changes. He remains that ever-genial, ever-dull Costner we're all too familiar with. We don't believe in his meanness, or his passion, or, most damagingly, in his eventual change of character - how are we to react to Randall's life-affirming turnaround when Costner is the same blank at the end that he was at the start? What the actor is doing in *The Guardian* isn't underplaying - it's *refusing* to play.

Kutcher, at least, is in there trying, and he does about as well as anyone could with his formulaic role. (Even the character's name is contrived - isn't it a little too neat that this top-grade swimmer is nicknamed "Fisch"?) But he's stuck with a charmless romantic subplot - all we learn about his paramour (Melissa Sagemiller) is that she's a teacher and ... nope, that's about it - and he doesn't have enough screen personality to make the film's endless, hoary clichés feel fresh. Who could? I know it's been nearly 25 years since its release, which makes it a prime candidate for remake material, but when Costner is spraying Kutcher with a hose and asking him for his D.O.R. (Drop on Request), is there anyone in the audience who *isn't* thinking about the identical scene in *Officer & a Gentleman* ?

Davis stages the rescue sequences with vigor - they may be over-edited, but they get the job

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done - and it would be hard to pinpoint a moment here that's out-and-out terrible; *The Guardian* is earnest and well-produced, and its heart is certainly in the right place. (The film was made with the full cooperation of the Coast Guard, and it's an honorable piece of cinematic recruitment propaganda.) Yet it's also contrived and melodramatic - Fischer, of course, has to have a Dark Secret from his past that must be confronted - and even though the Coast Guard has been long underrepresented on-screen, it feels like we've been here too many times before;

The Guardian

feels like it's shooting for Best Picture ... of 1986.



JET LI'S FEARLESS

It takes a certain degree of daring - if not outright hubris - to underline your retirement from the genre that made you a star by placing your name in the title. But Jet Li is nothing if not determined, and *Jet Li's Fearless*, fittingly, is a determined, and terrifically engaging, entertainment. As it tells its tale of Huo Yuanjia, the Chinese warrior who became a hero to his nation, *Fearless* employs a gripping, three-act structure - director Ronny Yu, staging the film with relaxed confidence, appears to relish the pleasures of a strong, simple narrative - which gives Li the opportunity to deliver three charmingly stylized performances. Utterly cheerful at the start, tragically noble at the end, Li's character arc is effectively outlined here, and the actor goes at his role with marvelous gusto, even though he doesn't reach the dramatic heights he *wants t* o; he's a little forced in all three segments. (I never quite bought Li's performance, but then again, I never quite buy it when Tom Cruise gives this performance, either.) Yet in addition to possessing a splendid gift for martial-arts mayhem, Li is a pleasantly ingratiating performer, and if he is indeed retiring from the genre, this film suggests that the actor could find success in whatever genre he next attacks. After all, Jet Li's fearless.

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