

My Eyes Are On the Sparrow: "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End"

Written by Mike Schulz

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PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: AT WORLD'S END

Roughly 30 minutes into *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, Johnny Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow makes an entrance that perhaps only Johnny Depp, being directed by Gore Verbinski, would be permitted to make: All we see is Depp's nose, in enormous close-up, as it hungrily sniffs out a peanut. Eventually we're treated to a full view of the sloshed swashbuckler we've been waiting a half hour to see, yet before Sparrow can pop the peanut in his mouth, he's shot dead. By Johnny Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow.

Sparrow, you see, is trapped in the Land of the Dead, and in his solitary, food-, water-, and rum-deprived purgatory state, is hallucinating that he is, in fact, surrounded by shipmates, all of whom bear an uncanny resemblance to himself. (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory's* Willy Wonka has turned himself *into* the Oompa-Loompas.) For a few, brief minutes the audience is given roughly twenty times the Johnny Depp for its money, and it's a pretty fair approximation of the *At World's End* experience as a whole.

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For a big-budget blockbuster sequel, the film doesn't provide as many Big-Budget Blockbuster Moments as maybe it should. But there are so many inspired, quirky, throwaway bits here that *At World's End* is enjoyable even while you're bemoaning its incoherence and occasional portentousness and the gaping hole that is the movie's romantic sub-plot. What it lacks in clarity is more than made up for in personality and frequent imagination; when the movie works, it works about 20 times better than a preordained mega-hit *needs* to.

It's not as though the filmmakers seem if *care* if you're up to speed on the niceties of the movie's plotting, as they so much as *tell* us so 10 minutes into the film. In the midst of a heated discussion with Singapore's Pirate King (Chow Yun-Fat), Keira Knightley's Elizabeth Swann begins to deliver catch-up information from the previous film's storyline (a great relief to those of us who couldn't explain *Dead Man's Chest*'s storyline if you *paid* us to). Yet while she recounts her experiences, the one-eyed pirate played by Mackenzie Crook is seen from the floorboards beneath Elizabeth, salaciously peeking up her dress.

The audience, expectedly, laughs - Crook's gleeful enjoyment of the moment made *me* laugh, too - and it's not until this sketch-comedy side-bar ends that you realize how much exposition you probably *missed* while you were laughing. Yet our confusion about the film's many, *many* plotlines isn't necessarily a detriment here - Verbinski could almost be saying, "Follow the plot, *don't* follow the plot... we'll amuse you regardless."

For those of us who found *Dead Man's Chest* a sporadically enthralling but wildly oppressive entertainment, the lightness of *At World's End* comes as welcome relief, and is never more apparent than in Depp's scenes. In the last *Pirates* film, the actor seemed to get unjustly Swallow-ed in the relentless shenanigans. Here, though, he seems rejuvenated. Not only do his flouncing movements appear possessed of rediscovered vigor, but his line readings have renewed bite as well; in describing Naomi Harris' mysterious goddess Tia Dalma, the way Depp wraps his besotted tongue around "a woman scorned like which fury hell

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hath

no" is enough to get you giggling.

Once he finally appears, Depp's presence is blessedly continual, but even if he were around far *less* often, there are always performers giving their roles more passion - and having more fun doing so - than Hollywood blockbusters traditionally allow.

For my money, the best shot in *Dead Man's Chest* was its very last one, when Geoffrey Rush's Barbossa miraculously returned from the dead; that film

sorely

needed a blast of the actor's malevolent-pirate shtick. But while Rush's "How the hell did

that

happen?" resurrection is only marginally explained in

At World's End

, you could care less about the mechanics involved - Rush is back, and God bless. Throwing his head back and widening his eyes as though channeling Norma Desmond, Rush spits out lines such as "What

arrrr

you doin'?" with ingratiating vehemence, and Harris is just as wickedly gratifying, her voodoo-priestess delivered with an insinuating purr. Rush's and Harris' character accents are so deliriously, broadly musical that it barely

matters

what they're saying; their rhythmic mellifluousness provides an enjoyment all its own.

Nearly actor for actor, the cast appears to be having far more fun than they did in *Dead Man's Chest*, and

then you're faced with Orlando Bloom. Now that the

Pirates

films have (perhaps) run their course, it's probably too late to ask: "What can be done about Orlando Bloom?", but seriously - what can be done about Orlando Bloom? He was just fine as a lightly comic romantic actor in the first

Pirates

, but he's deadly dull when striving for emotional honesty (and not just in this franchise), and unfortunately, he's almost single-handedly responsible for making large chunks of

At World's End

not work. Given his drearily self-regarding performance, Will's reunion with his father, played by Stellan Skarsgaard, has little heft - the nearly unrecognizable Skarsgaard provides the plotline's only hints at true feeling - and the mopey tar's climactic, mid-battle proposal to Elizabeth is an embarrassment that briefly stops the movie cold.

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Considering everything going on around him, though, it's easy to forget about Bloom. (Or at least find ways to *ignore* him: In the midst of the film's near-three hour running length, my friend had to use the restroom, and we agreed that any time a scene began with Bloom looking "tormented" was a pretty safe time to go.) We get Bill Nighy again lending legitimate pathos to his squid-faced Jones, the hatefully delightful Teacup Acting of Tom Hollander's Captain Beckett and a (too-short) cameo by the rock icon who served as Sparrow's inspiration. (Strange to say, but Depp's Captain Jack is now more Keith Richards than Keith Richards.) We get Knightley's increasingly spirited Elizabeth, who manages to get herself elected King of the Pirates. (It's that kind of movie.)

And, every once in a while, we do get the Big-Budget Blockbuster moments, which, in *this* sequel at any rate, are peppered with refreshing hints of artistry; the oceanic battles are more than impressively staged, but just as engrossing is the suggestive creepiness of the Land of the Dead sequence, and a beautifully-staged stand-off, and the comic exuberance of Sparrow's plan for returning from that netherworld... by tipping his rescuers' ship upside down.

Verbinski may never become a *lyrical* director, like Spielberg or Peter Jackson, but an imaginative one - and one with a true gift for slapstick mayhem - is nothing to shrug at. Neither are the minor moments in *At World's End* that end up providing major pleasure. I can't argue with claims that the movie is over-produced and unfocused and overly complicated, but I didn't leave feeling gypped. Any

Pirates

endeavor that finds two miniature Jack Sparrows hanging from their progenitor's cornrows - dispensing advice as if he were Tom Hulse in

Animal House -

is already providing

more

than its share of amusement.