Written by Mike Schulz
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WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

After his where's-my-paycheck? turn in *The Green Hornet*, I was mildly concerned that, following his Oscar-winning *Inglourious Basterds* portrayal, Christoph Waltz might be resigned to a career of forever playing Euro-trashy über-villains in Hollywood action dreck. With director Francis Lawrence's *Water for Elephants*, though – a Depression-era romance based on Sara Gruen's beloved novel – my fears have proved unfounded. As the egomaniacal, possibly sociopathic owner and ringleader of a second-tier traveling circus, enraged by the blossoming affections between his star-performer wife (Reese Witherspoon) and the troupe's young veterinarian (Robert Pattinson), Waltz is every bit as mesmerizing – charming, unpredictable, terrifying – as he was in Quentin Tarantino's World War II opus. Yet fantastic though he is, Waltz's talents here aren't a shock. The bigger surprise is that the movie itself is so bloody marvelous.

Boasting a topnotch script by Richard LaGravenese and splendidly atmospheric, evocative cinematography by Rodrigo Prieto, the movie re-creates a long-gone age with true feeling for both the period and those struggling to survive it; without pushing for its effects, Lawrence's film locates the beauty in squalor and the poetry in the mundane. Pattinson and Witherspoon, against some expectation, make a soulful, absolutely satisfying pairing, his slightly abashed charisma playing off her confident, radiant directness. And in the persona (animal-a?) of the elephant Rosie, whose arrival rescues the failing circus and whose Big Top tricks are literally jaw-dropping, the film provides no end of miracles. Despite its awkward narrative framing device and its perhaps-too-chaotic climax, the defiantly old-fashioned *Water for Elephants* delivers two hours of near-constant pleasure. It may not be the greatest show on Earth, but with *Rango* gone, it's currently, *definitely*, the greatest show at the cineplex.

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