



BATTLESHIP

In the latest effects-heavy entertainment by *Hancock* director Peter Berg, a group of heroic U.S. Navy and Japanese-military officers team up to fight a race of marauding aliens, four of whose spaceships have crash-landed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Battleship

? This thing should've been called
KerPlunk

Somewhat astonishingly, it could also be called an almost embarrassing amount of fun. When the project was first announced, it seemed too ludicrous to be believed: a big-screen "adaptation" of the popular board game, co-financed by the commercial-toy-slash-mindless-action-behemoth brain trust at Hasbro, and designed as *Pearl Harbor*

with whirling metallic orbs in place of kamikaze aircraft. In a wonderful shock, though, Berg and company don't try to disguise or ignore

Battleship

's inherent ridiculousness. Instead, they embrace it, and with such confident, goofy-ass gusto that the results turn out to be pretty tough to resist. In the film's first few minutes, Taylor Kitsch – playing the ne'er-do-well brother of Alexander Skarsgård's Navy hotshot – attempts to woo a famished young woman by breaking into a convenience store and stealing a burrito. And while the terrifically timed slapstick that follows probably would've been hysterical even if the scene

weren't

scored to Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther Theme," I'm glad we'll never know for sure. Happily, from its gags to its portrayals to its whiz-bang set pieces,

Battleship

oftentimes doesn't have its tongue planted so much as

grafted

in its cheek.

Berg's movie is hardly seamless; despite the explosive mayhem, an extended assault sequence halfway through quashes the lighthearted mood for too long a time, and there's an unfortunate surfeit of maudlin excess, personified mostly by the film's morose, legless Army vet who

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re-discovers his worth during the alien insurrection. (Thankfully, though, this character is impressively played by Gregory D. Gadson, a nonprofessional actor – and a real-life veteran and double amputee – whose naturalistic fierceness makes up for the role's obviousness.) Yet *Battleship*

is still a hoot. Fueled by a rock soundtrack that gives events just the right blend of cocksure, *Top Gun*

-esque

bravado and comedic too-much-ness, Berg's staging is nimble, the effects are strong and sometimes evocative, and the cast suggests that every single day on the set was a playful one. I had hoped that Kitsch and co-star Jesse Plemons would be as relaxed and confident here as they were working for Berg on TV's

Friday Night Lights

, and they are, but who could've guessed that pop star Rihanna (crooning a bit of "Sentimental Journey") and the famously dour Liam Neeson would be nearly as enjoyable?

Best of all, the film's clever ideas easily outnumber its bum ones, with screenwriters Jon and Erich Hoeber saving their smartest inspiration for last: the rousing, unexpectedly moving resurrection of the titular vessel, a ship that – like the beautifully weathered Navy officers who man her – hasn't seen combat in nearly 70 years. A high-tech summertime spectacle, *Battleship*

concludes with a stirring ode to the effectiveness of *low*

-tech, and in doing so, emerges as that most welcome kind of Hollywood blockbuster – a legitimately

surprising

one. Game on!



WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING

Actress Brooklyn Decker, who plays Taylor Kitch's beloved in *Battleship*, also shows up in director Kirk Jones'

at to Expect When You're Expecting

. Of course, most everyone

Wh

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does

. A sprawling ensemble comedy that follows its characters through the joys and heartaches of parenthood, impending and otherwise, the movie is so relentlessly formulaic and forced and sitcom-y that I don't think I bought a single minute of it. Geniality and good humor, though, do count for a lot, and I at least left grateful for the time spent with Ben Falcone, Rob Huebel, Anna Kendrick, Jennifer Lopez, Wendi McLendon-Covey, Chris Rock, Rodrigo Santoro, Thomas Lennon, and Rebel Wilson, all of whom make the time spent with Cameron Diaz, Matthew Morrison, Dennis Quaid, and, you know, the film's script a lot easier to bear. Elizabeth Banks, meanwhile, is so fabulously funny and endearing as a type-A type unprepared for the physical discomforts of pregnancy that the rest of

What to Expect

... could've easily been excised without anyone bitching about the resulting half-hour running length. Near the film's end, after her inspired comic anguish finally yields some exuberant joy, the continuously exceptional Banks says, "I finally found my glow!" Right. Like she's ever *stopped* glowing.



THE DICTATOR

Since Sacha Baron Cohen's 2006 triumph as Borat, he and director Larry Charles have released a new, caricature-based slapstick every three years, with 2009's *Brüno* now leading to *The Dictator*. If

their series' rate of declension is to be trusted, I am positively *dreading*

2015, because this unoriginal, depressingly mild, profoundly unfunny outing about a sadistic north-African despot who learns to love and thrive in New York suggests that the two probably need a

lo-o-o-o-ong

break from one another. With its thuddingly bad jokes made even worse by Charles' amateurish compositions and the cast's collective lack of invention (I'm not sure that Anna Faris, Ben Kingsley, and John C. Reilly have ever been less appealing),

The Dictator

may be worth a salute, but it's one you can deliver with only one finger.

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