

Lively, Long, and Prosperous: "Star Trek Into Darkness"

Written by Mike Schulz
Saturday, 18 May 2013 12:09

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STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS

Star Trek Into Darkness opens on a note of frenzied, almost satiric busyness. For reasons initially left unexplained, and in a set piece suggesting a futuristic *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

, Captain Kirk and “Bones” McCoy are first seen racing through a jungle of crimson foliage on a foreign planet, attempting to escape the clutches of dozens of yowling savages with black eyeballs and papier-mâché skin. The chase eventually leads the pair to the edge of a cliff where they leap into the water below, just as Mr. Spock – much to the concern of his unusually panicked fellow crew members – beams into the belly of an active, ready-to-burst volcano. Director J.J. Abrams’ franchise extender isn’t even five minutes old, and between the shouting, the manically staged mayhem, the whiplash editing, and composer Michael Giacchino’s pummeling score, it already feels like a typically overstuffed blockbuster sequel, yet one without any of the wit that Abrams brought to 2009’s terrifically witty

Star Trek reboot. But then something wonderful happens.

We follow Kirk and McCoy underwater as they evade their pursuers, and before long we find ourselves witnesses to an amusingly incongruous sight: the starship *Enterprise* resting quietly on the ocean floor. Scooping up its captain and grumpy doctor (and, in what I hope isn’t a spoiler, saving Spock for good measure), the ship makes a thunderous emergence from the depths before warp-speeding away from the alien world. And as the

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Enterprise

's crew zooms off, we're momentarily left with the planet's understandably awed natives, who gaze at the miraculous sight with jaws agape and black eyes unblinking, and immediately deify the shiny flying object; the next time we see them, they're sketching its likeness in the sand and grunting excitedly like Kubrick's apes in the presence of the monolith.

In a nutshell, and at its best, that's the experience of *Star Trek Into Darkness*. Abrams' sci-fi adventure will occasionally feel forced or formulaic or merely generically "thrilling," but nearly every time it does, the movie then comes through with some marvelously clever flourish or inventive touch – or, in the case of those alien savages, an unexpected development that shifts the storyline in subtle yet profound ways. (What initially appears to be little more than a typically grabby, pre-title-card sequence in a summertime smash turns out to be the dramatic catalyst that sets

Darkness

' entire plot into motion.) Despite the first-rate visual effects, I'll admit to being a little bored during the film's more aggressive action scenes, which seem to last twice as long as they need to, and contribute to the feeling that this 130-minute movie would've been far more satisfying had it clocked in at around 100. Yet when Abrams' outing isn't pushing so hard and focuses on what the

Star Trek

series (plural) have generally excelled in – principally the funny and touching relationships among the ships' crew members, but also engaging narratives presented with what might best be described as tongue-in-cheek solemnity –

Into Darkness

is a blast. As space operas go, it isn't an epic, game-changing sequel on a par with

The Empire Strikes Back

, or even 1982's

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan

, widely considered (and I agree) the best of the first film franchise's six installments. It is, however, a very good time – and, whenever Zachary Quinto or Benedict Cumberbatch is around, occasionally even a great one.



One of the most significant pleasures in 2009's *Star Trek* was the way Abrams' cast simultaneously paid homage to and gently ribbed the stars of Gene Roddenberry's original TV series. Maybe nobody could quite match the hammy brio of James Doohan's Scotty or the constipated pique of DeForest Kelley's McCoy, but that hardly mattered when Simon Pegg and Karl Urban were having so much fun approximating their styles, and Chris Pine's Kirk, Zoe Saldana's Uhura, John Cho's Sulu, and Anton Yelchin's Chekhov were all similarly playful without sacrificing the sincerity inherent in Roddenberry's creations. Obviously, we're now

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deprived of the sense of discovery that accompanied the actors' portrayals four years ago, but thankfully, the *Enterprise* figures in *Into Darkness*

are still a hoot – and no one here is hoot-ier than Quinto, whose Spock has emerged as both a unique comic presence and a spectacular tip of the hat to Leonard Nimoy. (Spock Sr. makes another brief, welcome appearance in this follow-up, and is again regarded by Quinto with a justified, lightly quizzical reverence.) It would be unfair to reveal the plot mechanics that let Quinto exponentially enrich his performance in the climactic scenes – suffice it to say I wasn't the only one shedding tears during the movie's last half hour – but all throughout Abrams' adventure, the actor delivers an alternately hilarious, endearing, and heartbreaking tug-of-war between Spock's human and Vulcan natures. (Every once in a while, Quinto is all three adjectives in a single reaction shot, as when Kirk says to Spock, "I'm going to miss you," and Spock is left with no response but tongue-tied, open-mouthed confusion.)

Benedict Cumberbatch, meanwhile, plays a character identified early on as John Harrison, a mellifluously voiced psychopath whose execution of a group of Starfleet commanders leads Kirk and company to chase the fugitive to the Klingon homeworld of Kronos. It should be noted that "John Harrison" is an alias, and the man's true identity, when it's revealed, isn't quite the shock that Giacchino's accompanying "dun-dun-du-u-u-un!" music would suggest. (At least not for those reasonably well-versed in *Star Trek*

mythology.) It should also be noted that, with Cumberbatch in the role, Harrison's true identity is maybe the only unsurprising thing about him; the actor's droll, threatening, intensely ferocious performance, delivered with the alertness and speed of the brilliant detective he plays on the BBC's

Sherlock

, keeps you guessing about his motivations even when you think you already know the worst.

Star Trek Into Darkness

is teeming with pleasures: the imaginative visual renderings of London and San Francisco circa 2259; the unexpected appearance of a Tribble; Kirk's incredulous reaction upon discovering that Spock and Uhura are having a lovers' quarrel. ("What is that even

like

?)") And if Cumberbatch can be recruited for future

Star Trek

installments, my guess is that this first-rate sci-fi series' pleasures will only continue to grow. It's elementary.

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