

Written by Mike Schulz

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CAPTAIN PHILLIPS

We've all seen movies that begin spectacularly well but seem to slowly, sadly lose their inspiration as they progress, leaving you to wonder, by their finales, what it was that initially had you so jazzed about them. Paul Greengrass' dramatic thriller *Captain Phillips*, I'm happy to say, is not one of those movies. Actually, it might be the exact opposite of one of those movies: a work that starts out distractingly shaky yet gradually morphs into something utterly spectacular – so spectacular, in truth, that you can barely remember how off-put you were by the comparative bummer of its early scenes.

Barely remembering, however, isn't quite the same as forgetting, so allow me to address *Captain Phillips*,

first 15 minutes before commencing with my praise. Based on the real-life 2009 hijacking of an American cargo ship by four well-armed Somalis, director Greengrass' latest opens in the suburban-Vermont home of the ship's captain, Richard Phillips, as he prepares for his ill-fated voyage. We know by the gentle light, homey décor, and Phillips' packing of a family photo that he's a man of fundamental decency, a notion exacerbated by the casting of Tom Hanks, an actor who's spent the vast majority of his screen career with "Man of the People" practically stenciled on his forehead. (For added telegraphing, Catherine "Salt of the Earth" Keener is cast as Phillips' wife.)

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But while this quiet introduction would almost certainly be all we'd require for empathy, Greengrass and screenwriter Billy Ray – adapting co-authors Phillips' and Stephen Talty's nonfiction account of the tale – don't appear entirely convinced. Instead, their opener is followed a strangely didactic ride-to-the-airport scene in which the spouses have a melancholy chat about their kids' futures and the uncertain economy and how "things aren't the way they used to be," their conversation sounding resoundingly like scripted (i.e., forced) dialogue. And by the time Phillips has boarded his ship, demanding safety inspections and drills that his union crew discreetly roll their eyes at, the man's incorruptible goodness already feels oppressive – and is evidenced further when you notice that Phillips had that family photo also printed on his coffee mug. (So why pack the picture?) We get it, you want to say: Phillips plus Hanks equals saint.

Greengrass and Ray do, at least, hint that *Captain Phillips* will be less cut-and-dried than its prelude suggests with their early inclusion of a sequence set in a depressed Somali outpost. Entrenched in the environment's horrific poverty, easy access to artillery, and constant, looming threat of violence, we're made to understand the conditions that could lead to an oceanic hijacking – conditions that can also be read, in full, in the gaunt, haunted, murderously determined face of Barkhad Abdi, who portrays (in a sensational film debut) the mission's eventual leader Muse. While never overtly sympathizing with Muse and the three other Somali pirates who board Phillips' ship, the movie refuses to view its antagonists solely as "the other," which is a refreshing break from the norm. It would've been even more refreshing, I thought, if this weren't the very same tactic employed by Greengrass for his 9/11 thriller

United 93

; despite the undeniable professionalism of its presentation, I spent the movie's first 15 minutes feeling like Greengrass, in

Captain Phillips

, was traveling on perhaps-too-well-trod ground.



And here is where my complaining ends. Because from the moment Phillips becomes aware of the Somalis (in two boats, initially) trailing his ship, the film turns into something downright extraordinary: a dramatic procedural that becomes an intense cat-and-mouse thriller, and then a beat-the-clock action pic, and then a harrowing rescue tale, and finally a heart-wrenching look at the emotional impact of real-life heroism.

No one familiar with Greengrass' helming of *United 93* or the second and third entries in the Jason Bourne franchise will be surprised to learn that, on a technical level,

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Captain Phillips

is close to breathtaking. With

The Hurt Locker

's Barry Ackroyd serving as cinematographer,

Greengrass' seemingly caught-on-the-fly (yet surely rigorously thought-out) compositions are presented with clarity and immediacy, and Christopher Rouse's marvelously sharp editing – combined with the propulsive thrust of composer Henry Jackman's superb score – makes you grateful that breathing is an involuntary bodily function.

Sterling technique of the sort displayed here would handily make Greengrass' outing first-rate. It's the movie's humans that make it potentially unforgettable. I was thrilled that the direction and Ray's script gave Abdi and Muse's heavily armed companions – very well-played by Barkhad Abdirahman, Faysal Ahmed, and Mahat M. Ali – numerous opportunities for nuance, especially in roles that could have been stereotypical or, at worst, actively offensive. But I was less thrilled than flabbergasted that Hanks, after so many going-through-the-motions performances in the years since 2000's *Cast Away*, could again appear on-screen this vital and connected and *alive*, with his last 10 minutes

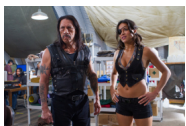
here perhaps marking a new high point in the career of the two-time Oscar winner. (I was literally shaking during his final scene. Not as much as

he

was, but shaking nonetheless.)

Captain Phillips

is absolutely worth a salute. Though he likely won't get one in this intensely competitive year, Hanks is worth a gold-plated one.



MACHETE KILLS

Robert Rodriguez's ultra-gory action comedy *Machete Kills* opens with what, at first, I presumed was a *faux* trailer for this franchise's second sequel, a

cheese-oid intergalactic adventure titled

Machete Kills Again ... in Space!

Designed, as both previous

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Machete

s were, as a 1970s exploitation thriller complete with risible dialogue and squirting viscera and bountiful cleavage and such, this beyond-campy short film was an obvious homage to the sorts of D-grade coming attractions you'd catch at a particularly seedy drive-in, and I thought it was kind of cool. But when, at

Machete Kills

' climax, it was revealed that (sigh ... Spoiler Alert ...) the trailer apparently *wasn't*

faux

, and that, in all likelihood, a

Machete Kills Again ... in Space!

actually

was

on the horizon, my amusement quickly soured. Are Rodriguez, scowling star Danny Trejo, and whatever Hollywood pariahs they can corral into participating really going to expend their energies on yet

another

of these things?

I didn't hate *Machete Kills*. Quite a bit of it, in truth, was fun. I liked Sofia Vergara's comically perverse turn as a pissed-off house madam and an early attack that found Trejo's title character splitting an assailant in half length-wise, and never thought I'd see the usually grounded Demián Bichir this fearlessly funny, gobbling the scenery as a psychopath with a split personality and hideous magenta suit jacket. But as it has been throughout most of his career, Rodriguez's so-amateurish-it-must-be-intentional style – which suggests a near-complete disinterest in narrative and visual structure – quickly grows tiresome here, and I was yawning at the film's "unexpected" twists and "shocking" slapstick violence before even a half hour had passed. (It turns out that watching heads getting lopped off gets *really boring* after the first dozen or so times.) If this is your particular cup of tea, by all means enjoy. Personally, I'll enjoy trying to forget about

Machete Kills

until its seemingly inevitable space sequel enters our orbit, and especially its depressing stunt casting of Mel Gibson as a megalomaniacal inventor, and Charlie Sheen – appearing here under birth name Carlos Estevez and given the requisite "Winning!" gag – as the president of the United States. Martin Sheen, of course, also knows a thing or two about playing U.S. presidents. He must be

so

proud.

