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DVD review

Sub-par character development can't sink visually detailed 'Life Aquatic'

BY JOSH LINTEREUR
PULSE REPORTER

With films such as "Rushmore" and "The Royal Tenenbaums," director Wes Anderson has always teetered dangerously close to overplaying his customary freewheeling ironic panache into smug detachment.

In those films, the celebrated auteur skillfully avoided ironic overindulgence by extracting pathos for his bizarre and dysfunctional characters. But with his latest effort, "The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou," many critics jumped ship, citing a lack of discernible poignancy in the story of a Jacques Cousteau-like oceanographer on the downside of his career.

While it's true the film's characters are the most underdeveloped of any in Anderson's three previous films ("Bottle Rocket" is the third), "The Life Aquatic" is not without heart or sentiment, and it demonstrates that even the most whimsically detached Anderson film is still a flaky good time.

Bill Murray stars as the self-absorbed, melancholic Steve Zissou, whose oceanographic documentaries play at international film festivals and make him a romanticized superhero to children. The role continues Murray's recent run of hilariously underplayed but deeply felt depressives, and the

catharsis Zissou undergoes holds the film together.

When the film opens, Zissou screens his latest film depicting his best friend being eaten alive by what might be a jaguar shark (though Zissou can't say for sure because he dropped the camera when it occurred). He vows to find and kill the shark for his next film but is unable to secure any funding thanks to his waning popularity and the success of his rival, Alistair Hennessey, played by Jeff Goldblum (who has never found a prickly character he couldn't nail). Zissou is re-inspired by the arrival of Ned Plimpton (Owen Wilson), a genteel southerner who may or may not be his son, and Zissou sets out to find the creature that killed his friend.

Despite a stacked ensemble cast, only Zissou's character is fully developed, and the effect of neglecting the other roles is heightened by the quality of the performers behind them, especially Cate Blanchett, who turns in another graceful performance as a journalist profiling Zissou. Blanchett's portrayal feels slightly borrowed from her recent Oscar-winning role as Katharine Hepburn in "The Aviator," but like Murray, the now familiar guise works so perfect that it's tough to be

too critical.

While the characters are underwritten, the heart of the film is found in its retro-inspired details, where every nuance seems meticulously planned. A three-dimensional cutaway of Team Zissou's boat, "The Belafonte," creates a living dollhouse that portrays life aboard the ship. The fanciful set, where a single camera shot captures several rooms at once, captures a child's depiction of a Cousteau-like life of adventure.

And when Team Zissou descends into the deep blue sporting silver wetsuits while being cheered on by Mark Mothersbaugh's cheeky score, those details serve a dramatic purpose; they heighten the contrast with Zissou's frumpy spirit, which exists amidst the Saturday morning cartoon splendor that is his career.

Of course, those types of devices don't necessarily work for all audiences, and filmgoers not enthralled with Anderson's previous films will want to stay away from "The Life Aquatic." But Wes Anderson fans who shied away after the poor reviews it received during its theatrical run will want to give the DVD a chance.

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