

JACK AUBREY (RUSSELL CROWE) SURVEYS THE BARREN ISLAND HE'S BROUGHT HIS MEN TO FOR MEDICAL RECOVERY.



STEPHEN VAUGHAN, 20TH CENTURY FOX, 2003.

Compelling Sea Story

And the agonies of leadership

MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD:

Directed by Peter Weir. Written by Weir and John Collee, based on the novels by Patrick O'Brian. Produced by Samuel Goldwyn Jr. Produced by Peter Weir, Duncan Henderson, Alan B. Curtiss. Cinematography, Russell Boyd. Production design, William Sandell. Editor, Lee Smith. Costumes, Wendy Stites. Visual effects supervisor, Stefan Fangmeier, Nathan McGuinness. Music, Iva Davies, Christopher Gordon, Richard Tognetti. Starring Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany, with James D'Arcy, Edward Woodall, Chris Larkin, Max Pirkis, George Innes, Robert Pugh. Universal Pictures. Miramax Films. Twentieth Century Fox, 2003. PG-13. 140 minutes.

Patrick O'Brian's 20-volume seafaring sagas of the Napoleonic War era debut on the screen in a splendid recreation of the first and 10th in the series, aided by Peter Weir's rich ability to visualize the intricate social life aboard a tall ship sailing the oceans of the world. It's a stable place where class, rank and honor matter. The adventures of Lucky Jack Aubrey and his friend, naturalist and ship surgeon Stephen Maturin — their conflicts, friendship and daily interactions — give depth and cogency to the unfolding stories.

Encouraged in by a 1991 review of O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin novels, in which *The New York Times Book Review* reviewer called them "the best historical novels ever written," I read them and became a fervent reader, part of a small, worldwide literary circle.

Now Weir has translated O'Brian's lyrical language, historical accuracy and indelible characterizations into image, action and character true to the original in every sense that matters, except one. Russell Crowe is both masterful and commanding as Lucky Jack, but Paul Bettany is less persuasive as Maturin. In the novels, Maturin is a more perfect match for the brash captain, while he is strictly second banana here.

The problem is not new, and Crowe's larger-than-life portrait of Aubrey is not to blame. Remember the thankless role of hero that fell to Orlando Bloom in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Bloom's character, a master swordsman, fades away when pirate Johnny Depp is around. Likewise, sparks should fly between Maturin and Aubrey, because neither is complete without the other, but Bettany cannot hold his own with Crowe. He is too well mannered, too civi-

lized. If future films ensue, Maturin's scenes should be beefed up, so that we see how these dedicated men draw on each other's strengths to survive.

Weir's film shows how the men aboard *HMS Surprise*, a British frigate, experience the great natural wonder of winds, seas and storms. But an unexpected attack by a far superior enemy vessel off the coast of Brazil in 1805 leads to an adventure that puts them in the path of a monster typhoon as they round the dangerous waters of Cape Horn. On a mission to intercept the French Privateer that attacked them, the *Archeron*, both captain and surgeon of the *Surprise* must redefine the nature of their friendship.

Visual effects blend seamlessly with conventional cinematography of an actual storm. These "invisible" effects lend a documentary feel to the great typhoon that catches the men aboard a 120-foot square-rigger as it rounds Cape Horn. While the physicality of shooting the film makes a fascinating story in itself, the results are terrific onscreen.

Every visible object is correct for the period, and its use has been carefully researched and learned by the actors. In an age when special effects such as those in *The Matrix* series draw millions of viewers, the real-life solutions that make *Master and Commander* stand out should not be ignored. Futuristic but emotionally empty special-effects movies can't hold a candle to the 200-year-old reality depicted here. Foreign and exotic to our contemporary eyes, these elegant sailing ships are a marvel of human ingenuity and craftsmanship. "Human" is the operative word here.

The youth of some of the actors deserves a word or two here. Often young boys of noble birth, such as Lord Blakeney (Max Pirkis), were injured or killed in the line of duty. According to the press notes, Weir "built up" their parts so it would be clear they were treated on board as equals. "They had to take the injuries, sail the ship, go into battle and fight alongside the men," Weir said.

If you love the movie, read the books. *Master and Commander* is now playing at Cinemark and Cinema World. Highest recommendations. **CW**

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ELF - PG (12:10 2:20) 4:35 6:50 9:00
SCARY MOVIE 3 - PG-13 (1:10) 3:20 5:20 7:25 9:30
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