

A group of high-seas adventurers led by *The Belafonte's* captain (center), Steve Zissou (Bill Murray), and his wife, Eleanor (Anjelica Huston).



PHILIPPE ANTONELLO/BUENA VISTA PUBLICITY/2004

## Into the Unknown

With fake fish and pirates

### THE LIFE AQUATIC WITH STEVE ZISSOU:

Written and directed by Wes Anderson. Co-written by Noah Baumbach. Produced by Wes Anderson, Barry Mendel, Scott Rudin. Executive producer, Rudd Simmonds. Cinematographer, Robert Yeoman. Editor, David Moritz. Production design, Mark Friedberg. Costume design, Milena Canonera. Music, Mark Mothersbaugh. Music supervisor, Randall Poster. Animation, Henry Selick. Starring Bill Murray. With Owen Wilson, Cate Blanchett, Anjelica Huston, Willem Dafoe, Jeff Goldblum, Michael Gambon, Noah Taylor, Bud Cort, Pelé dos Santos and Seymour Cassel. Touchstone Pictures, 2004. R. 118 minutes.

**A** weird title and stars such as Bill Murray, Owen Wilson and a fabulous Cate Blanchett may bring folks to the theater, but this hodge-podge of a movie probably won't make even aficionados happy. Why the film doesn't work is complicated, but the marine setting doesn't help.

It's as if director Wes Anderson imagined the movie as some kind of ocean creature. Should it be a Crayon Pony Fish, an outlandish but colorful fake designed by animator Henry Selick? How about the movie as an electric jellyfish with glowing globular patterns? Or should the movie be pure hokum, like the 80-foot Jaguar Shark? As metaphor, Selick's ocean creatures made me feel I was watching the fake fish in a doctor's waiting-room aquarium. Anderson's film is as blatantly phony as the light-colored, critter killer shark with black spots and a mean disposition, which ate Steve Zissou's (Murray) former partner and set the whole plot in motion.

More baloney than fish, this hybrid *Life Aquatic* is at once a satirical send-up of a marginal television underwater adventure show and a melodrama about the host's own dark-edged, mid-life crisis. I can't recall a single sequence in which the antagonistic thematic elements actually come together. By the time the hero springs into action and takes on the modern-day pirates, I'd lost interest in the episodic plot.

The film is strangely edited — choppy, disjointed. Curiously, the camera pauses a long time on irrelevant scenes such as a character talking on the telephone, which neither creates conflict nor moves the story along. This holding-the-take flaw prompts me to suggest the crew and actors probably should not actually work if they are drunk or stoned. Murray may only pretend to be stoned, but it seemed all of them resided in an altered universe not accessible to the audience.

According to the press notes, Anderson thought he was making an adventure genre film. He said he'd been thinking about this

film for 14 years. Hmm. Then he and his writing pal, Noah Baumbach, met at a New York restaurant, Bar Pitti, every day and fleshed out the screenplay. Oh.

I wasn't a fan of Anderson's first film, *Bottle Rocket*, 1996. Besides being too

freakin' adolescent for my taste, the film was mean-spirited. By *Rushmore*, Anderson had found his way to tell offbeat, ironic stories about curious characters while entertaining the audience. *The Royal Tennenbaums* was even better. The characters were weird, but their psychodrama stayed within the family. The Tennenbaums were spectacularly more idiosyncratic than your average mom, dad, bub and sis unit, but Anderson's movie was about how they worked — or didn't work — as a familial group. I loved it. Anderson probably intended the underwater explorers and crew of Zissou's ship to seem like a family, but the effort fails.

I LOOK FORWARD TO ANDERSON'S NEXT MOVIE. THIS ONE IS A DUD.

Murray gives his usual deadpan performance here, but I looked in vain for the understated heart of Steve Zissou. Such a self-absorbed character is hard to like. Ned Plimpton (Wilson), is Steve's son, who wanted a look at his dad but stays to become part of Team Zissou. In one of Wilson's first non-comic roles, he is paired him with Cate Blanchett as Jane, a smart, pregnant journalist bent on interviewing Zissou and returning to sanity. Jane and Ned are the only warm-blooded, non-cartoon characters onboard the *Belafonte*.

Other characters include Klaus Daimler (Willem Dafoe), an engineer, who needs attention and praise from Zissou. Eleanor (Anjelica Huston) is Zissou's wife, who has brains, money and the opportunity to get away from the *Belafonte*, which she exercises early in the film. Bill Ubell (Bud Cort) is the solid, bond-company stooge kidnapped by pirates. Cort puts heart into this small role. Rival oceanographer Alistair Hennessey (Jeff Goldblum) is Zissou's nemesis.

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* is now playing at Cinemark and Cinema World. I look forward to Anderson's next movie. This one is a dud. **EW**

## Deadpan Walking\*

Private Idaho

**NAPOLEON DYNAMITE:** Written and directed by Jared Hess. Co-written by Jerusha Hess. Produced by Jerry Coon, Chris Wyatt, Sean C. Covel. Executive producer, Jory Weitz. Cinematography, Munn Powell. Production design, Cory Lorenzen. Editor, Jeremy Coon. Music, John Swihart. Starring Jon Heder, with Jon Gries, Aaron Ruell, Efrén Ramirez, Tina Majorino and Diedrich Bader. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2004. PG. 86 minutes.

**A** sleeper, *Napoleon Dynamite* has been on local movie screens since July 23. Allowed to find its legs and grow a word-to-mouth audience, the little film that could, did. It finished the year with a worldwide, cumulative box office take of nearly \$45 million and was released on DVD December 21. I finally caught the film in its final round of theatrical release at Movies 12. I wanted to understand why all the cool twenty- and thirty-year olds in my extended family were urging me to see it.

Created by 26-year-old, writer and director Jared Hess and his 23-year-old co-writer and wife, Jerusha, both former film students at Brigham Young University, *Napoleon Dynamite* (Jon Heder) is everybody's secret high-school nerd identity. No matter how smart, rich, hip or talented we become, the inner Napoleon reminds us of a time when we didn't know how much we didn't know and thought we knew everything.

Never a smart-ass, Napoleon possesses a profoundly unself-conscious confidence that fuels his every interaction, even those in which he is being physically bashed about. He casually tosses out wholly outrageous white lies when the conversation calls for it, such as touting his deadly Ninja numchuk skills and his immodest expertise in wolverine hunting.

Napoleon lives in a small town in Idaho, similar to Preston, Idaho, where film director Hess grew up. Napoleon and his 31 year-old brother, Kip (Aaron Ruell), who is a strange duck, live with their grandmother. After she is injured in a motorcycle accident, Uncle Rico (Jon Gries), comes to take care of the boys.

Now Napoleon's worst fears are realized: He's not only bullied at school but also at home. Rico is a guy who has never found himself, a lost soul whose life effectively stopped when he got out of high school. He lives out of his van, selling plastic storage containers and breast enhancers. He believes in time-travel and other woo-woo (read: crank) ideas.

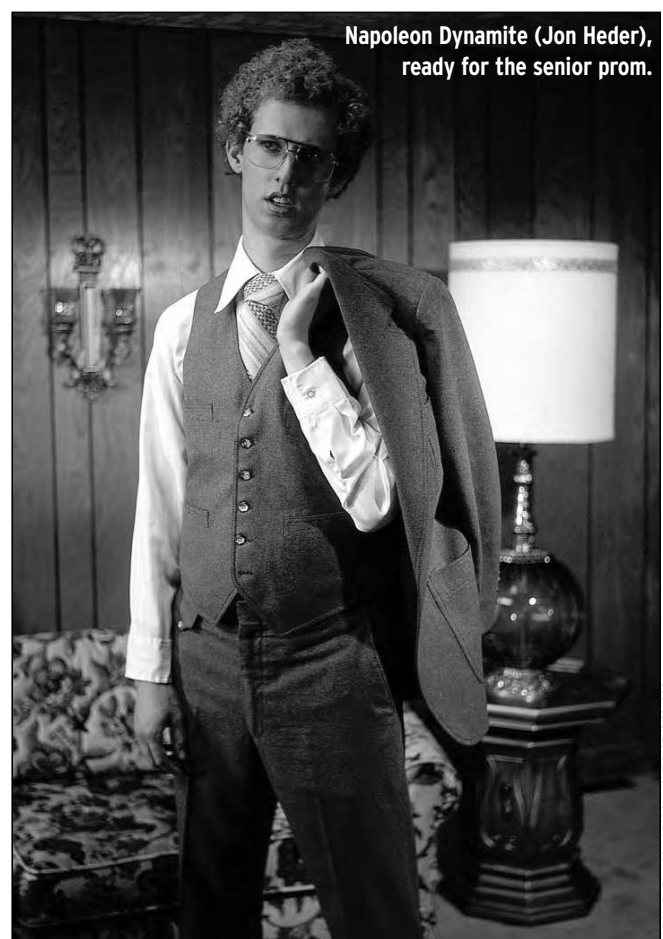
Napoleon makes friends with a new boy in school, Pedro (Efrén Ramirez), and admires Deb (Tina Majorino), who seems to like him back, so the three of them pal around together. Pedro hardly has a word to say, but girls like him. Deb is dying for high

school to be over so she can get out of town. Meantime, she peddles hand-crafted, boondoggle key rings she made and practices photography by taking glamor shots of Rico. Deb is totally lovable.

Like all teen movies I've seen, I'm suspicious of *Napoleon Dynamite's* improbable, happy ending. While his actions are congruent with his character, Napoleon might not bring down the house with the dance form he's practiced in front of the mirror at home. But he would stand up for his friend, Pedro. And that's the kind of action that counts, even for a high school geek.

For at least one more week, *Napoleon Dynamite* is playing at Movies 12. Be there or be square.

\*P.S. I stole the great headline from Michael Atkinson's review of the film in the *Village Voice*. **EW**



Napoleon Dynamite (Jon Heder), ready for the senior prom.

AARON RUELL/FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/2004