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movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH



Balain (Orlando Bloom) and Godfrey (Liam Neeson) on their way to the Holy Land.

The Unrelenting Crusades

Beauty, bloody beauty

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN: Produced and directed by Ridley Scott. Written by William Monahan. Executive producers, Branko Lustig, Lisa Ellzey, Terry Needham. Cinematography, John Mathieson. Production design, Arthur Max. Editor, Dody Dorn. Costume design, Janty Yates. Music, Harry Gregson-Williams. Starring Orlando Bloom, with Liam Neeson, Marton Csokas, Eva Green, David Thewlis, Brendan Gleeson, Jeremy Irons, Edward Norton and Ghassan Massoud. Twentieth Century Fox, 2005. R. 145 minutes.

The Crusades (1095-1291) spanned 200 years of history that contemporary Americans know little about. There were eight crusades in all. The first began with Christians from the West answering the call of the Pope to take back the city of Jerusalem from the Muslims, with armies of believers and mercenaries. A Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was set up, with a Christian king as its ruler.

At the time Ridley Scott's epic opens in 1186, the kingdom is in disarray, weakened by internal dissent and the Muslim's growing power under the leadership of the great Saladin. A Jerusalem in which Jews, Christians and Muslims worshiped at their own sacred sites was threatened from within and without.

In France, a grief-stricken blacksmith named Balain (Orlando Bloom) is roused from his sadness by a traveling crusader, Godfrey of Ibelin (Liam Neeson), who offers him a place in his army. Godfrey is loyal to King Baldwin of Jerusalem (Edward Norton), and, it turns out, Balain's long-absent father. Neeson's understated but powerful presence carries the weight of this part in the story.

Unfortunately, Godfrey finds Balain in a dark, uncommunicative state, and Balain never quite gains the respect that Godfrey effortlessly engenders. Balain's a fine military tactician and a peaceful ruler who gets his hands dirty in a village project. He's a believable lover with the king's sister, Sibylla (Eva Green of *The Dreamers*), and we respect him as a knight of "right action."

But Balain doesn't become an indelible character before gruesome battles fractures the film's narrative. Balain fights well, taught en route to the Holy Land by his father, but except for the very first fight of his life, he doesn't rise to the heroic, larger than life figure needed. Unlike Russell Crowe in Scott's *Gladiator*, a man who "uses his body as a fighting machine, playing Maximus as a hands-on general who earns his soldiers' re-

spect through unblinking personal courage and unconventional but crafty battlefield strategies." (*EW* 05/11/00).

The film is a reasonably accurate historical picture of life in Palestine during the 12th century. Production design, costumes, cinematography are excellent. The film bears Scott's legendary screen hallmarks, which include breathtaking panoramic scenes, as the cerulean seas of the harbor dotted with ships and docks swarming with activity. Scott lavishes the life of the time with the cunning details of everyday life, such as the digging of a well. And he loves the glory of pomp and circumstance, such as the beautiful silver mask worn by Baldwin, the Leper King, and the dominant ruby on Balain's sword handle. Scott's masterful strokes of raw violence, such as the sudden tossing of an opponent into a blazing fire, still shock. And his stunning visual style evokes the smell of incense burning in the lovers' plush rooms as sensuously as the nightly bombardment of Jerusalem by 20,000 Muslim fighters, reminiscent of shock and awe. Another trademark of Scott's is flawed heroes who must overcome internal demons to defeat the external ones.

The villains are Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas), a defiant, bloodthirsty baron married to the king's sister, and his henchman, Reynald de Chatillon (Brendan Gleeson). They are enemies of the king's attempts to keep the peace. While the king's advisor Tiberias (Jeremy Irons) is loyal and fair-minded, he has no power after the king's death. Queen Sibylla crowns her despised husband king. Guy promptly squanders the army's might in a doomed military move against Saladin (Syrian actor Ghassan Massoud).

In 1187 a face-to-face meeting brings together the defender of Jerusalem, Balain, and the winner of the battle to recapture the city, Saladin. Bloom's youthfulness works against Balain even as he exhibits a sinewy toughness in negotiations. But Massoud's quietly powerful characterization of Saladin as a gracious victor and statesman allows him to have a small ironic laugh at their parley and truce. Saladin seems to know his victory will provoke another crusade.

Now playing at Cinemark and Cinema World, *Kingdom of Heaven* is highly recommended.

EW