



Rock Star

The adventurer who cut off his arm to save his life

127 HOURS: Directed by Danny Boyle. Written by Boyle and Simon Beaufoy. Cinematography, Anthony Dod Mantle. Music, A.R. Rahman. Starring James Franco. Fox Searchlight, 2010. R. 94 minutes. ★★☆☆

The next time you're tempted to use the expression "I'd give my right arm for that," consider the story of Aron Ralston. Ralston is the hiker who, using only a dull knife, cut off his arm after a boulder pinned him in a canyon in 2003. At the time, the story resonated as a shocking act of survival, a testament to grim willpower so extreme that the logistics are hard to conjure. For the morbidly curious, there is Ralston's memoir, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, but a film adaption seemed unlikely until, with a faint whiff of inevitability, director Danny Boyle entered the picture. Although the story presents dramatic challenges aplenty — namely, the *Castaway* problem of an actor performing alone for an hour — Ralston in many ways is the classic Boyle hero, a reckless but relentless survivor in a world of numb indifference or outright violence. From *Trainspotting* to *28 Days Later*, Boyle's affection for frenzy seems only to deepen, along with a frenzied approach to filmmaking that can feel like an end in itself.

When we last saw Boyle, he was packing the allowable limit of melodrama into the creaky vessel that is *Slumdog Millionaire*. This time, his mode is gritty realism all the way. If you're the type that can stomach an amputation scene but not a lot of ponderous backstory, fear not: Ralston (played by James Franco) reaches the desert by the end of the title credits. *127 Hours* is a cheap thrill told swiftly: Aron goes mountain biking, meets two girls, finds a swimming hole, then scampers away with a hearty wave and, once he's out of earshot, dislodges a boulder that will pin him to a canyon wall for five days. His hero stuck, Boyle resorts predictably to, well, Boylerplate, a set of visual gimmicks and tricks to emphasize the pain and isolation of Aron's situation.

As Aron, Franco is literally left alone to his devices — a watch, a canteen, a utility tool and some rope — and I'm happy to

report that the actor's sly sense of humor helps enliven this story of near-death. Talk about the method approach: If that's not actual urine Franco is drinking (he's been peeing into his empty water bottle) on day four, I'm a champion free climber. Franco's best scene is a mock self-interview set to an audience track. His mind is going the way of his body, and Franco works the pathos effectively from the scene.

But in a movie crying out for flashbacks, Boyle overdelivers. In some, the images are too brief to be meaningful, while in the developed sequences Aron reveals himself as a jerk. The trouble with *127 Hours* is, we don't know him as anything else. After demonstrating all the ways Aron is not like us — ultra-fit, aloof, even emotionally cruel — how can we possibly relate? He's a rock star, if you will, but in *127 Hours*, he's not someone we should care about.

In every sense, we don't go anywhere with Aron once he's trapped beneath the chalkstone rock. Boyle evokes the fatigue and the frustration of the predicament but not the agony of facing a slow death alone. We see Aron's crushed arm and his chapped lips, and we register the change — Franco ably communicates the slippage into delirium — but we don't feel it to the degree we should. And while the zeal with which Aron finally saws off his arm produces a fair amount of blood and tissue, the amputation is a desperate and grizzly sequence, proving that to feel the loss of something, we first have to care about it.

Toward the end, Aron hallucinates a roomful of people — presumably, everyone who matters to him — and even they don't look surprised, let alone concerned, at the turn his life has taken. Shouldn't we register the potential loss, even if they don't? Boyle's visual style leaves so little to the imagination — dream sequences go on way too long, camera placements seemed designed to impress — that the impression is he's always directing. The good news is, just like Aron Ralston, you survive *127 Hours*. I just hoped to emerge a little wiser from it. **EW**



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