Pirates of The Caribbean: On Stranger Tides (2011)

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Four years ago the popular ‘Pirates of The Caribbean’ trilogy ended. After a hugely popular first entry it was widely felt that its two sequels had become over-hyped, formulaic, bloated and full of plot holes. Once the Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann story had been resolved many thought that would be the end of the series that grossed over a staggering $2 billion at the box office.

When I heard there was to be a fourth film I was ready to write it off, feeling that it was a case of greedy studio execs milking something (that was already looking tired) for all it was worth. This third sequel is free of Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann and is in many respects a fresh start rather than a follow up. There are many new characters introduced as well as some old favourites.

With new director Rob Marshall (‘Nine’, ‘Chicago’) this adventure sees the rum guzzling Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) in search of the Fountain of Youth. Sparrow holds the only map to the Fountain’s location and it is not long before the Empires of Great Britain and Spain are also on the hunt. New character Angelica (Penelope Cruz) is a silver-tongued thief with cunning to rival Sparrow and it is no surprise when we learn that she is an old flame of his.

The villain of this film is the legendary pirate Edward Teach aka Blackbeard played with relish by Ian McShane (‘Lovejoy’, ‘Deadwood’) who also happens to be Angelica’s father! With Stephen Graham (‘Snatch’, ‘This is England’, ‘Boardwalk Empire’) also on board as one of the crew all the elements are present for more swashbuckling antics in exotic locations, but does ‘Pirates 4’ deliver the goods or is it a shameless and pointless cash-in?

Well, surprisingly this new entry seemed sleek and much more fast-paced than the previous two editions. The running time is mercifully shorter by a good thirty or more minutes. Gone is the contrived exposition and long-winded back-stories. This one feels fresh and unencumbered. Everyone is clearly having a riot and so too will the audience (for all the right reasons!). There is humour aplenty and two standout performances from Depp and the always-watchable Geoffrey Rush reprising his role as Captain Barbossa.

This one has excellent special effects and huge production values as you would expect but more importantly you enjoy watching all the quirky eccentric characters in action. Keith Richards and Judi Dench also pop up in brief cameos and the overall effect is that the scriptwriters got it right this time. Audiences want humour and fast action and this one won’t disappoint them. Having a ‘stand-alone’ adventure is a great idea and I will go so far to say that this is the best ‘Pirates’ film since the original.