Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull

Talent: Harrison Ford, Cate Blanchett, Shia LaBoeuf, Karen Allen, Ray Winstone.

Date of review: Thursday 29th May, 2008
Director: Steven Spielberg
Classification: M
We rate it: Four and a half stars.

Like many people my age (that is, Gen X rather than Gen Y…) I grew up wanting to be Indiana Jones. I was a very young kid when Raiders of the Lost Ark was released in 1981, and like many of my schoolmates, I went home after leaving the cinema and said to my Dad “I’m going to be an Archaeologist.” Like many of my friends’ Dads, mine replied “I don’t think so.” After further discussion, it was made clear to me that most Archaeologists don’t carry six-shooters and bullwhips, ride horses in pursuit of Nazi trucks, engage in supernatural rituals or save the world. This, to me, was an astonishing disappointment, but it also pointed out one of the principal beauties of the cinema: the fact that sitting there, safe and in the dark, we can engage in terrifically entertaining fantasy and glorious escapism. This is what many of the films of Steven Spielberg have been all about letting us do.

With Harrison Ford swearing black and blue that he’d never make another Indiana Jones film after the third one, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989) many of we die-hard fans thought the franchise was over after that somewhat disappointing effort. (Despite the presence of the great Sean Connery playing Indy’s Dad, the film didn’t really hit the high mark established by Raiders of the Lost Ark.) Now, however, with much fanfare, our fantasies have been realised, and the long-awaited ‘fourth film in the trilogy’ has come to fruition. Harrison is back, still as tough as ever at 65 years of age, and he’s accompanied not only by young star-of-the-moment Shia LaBoeuf (who was apparently so excited to be invited into the cast that he accepted the gig without reading the script) but by the original Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen) as well. Marion was such a wonderful character in the first film (and Allen is such a charming actress) that she was sorely missed in episodes two and three; and it is wonderful to see her here again. The great Ray Winstone also joins the cast this time around, and our own Cate Blanchett is terrific as ever as a brunette-wigged villain.

So what’s the plot? Well, it’s the 1950s, and the “Communist threat” is being felt all through the conservative US; Nuclear testing is being carried out, Jimmy Dean is the style hero of the moment, and the Russians are the badguys lurking at the edges of the frame. The Indiana Jones character is introduced brilliantly, as he and his slightly slimy-looking friend, Mac (Winstone) have been kidnapped by the aforementioned
Russians, and are taken to Area 51 out in Nevada, held at gunpoint and ordered to find a particular artefact that bad-girl Cate needs to get her hands on. Resourceful Indiana has no option but to find the MacGuffin, which turns out to be none other than the Crystal Skull of the title. But what kind of skull is it, exactly? Those who know about Area 51 will be able to tell you…

The chase, of course, is on after this, as Indy escapes with the artefact and we are whipped up into exactly the kind of mile-a-minute extravaganza that Spielberg is so famous for providing his audiences with. We hop from the central United States to Peru to goodness-knows-where, with motorbike-chases, car-chases, gunfights, fisticuffs of all kinds, romantic revelations, character reversals, and some nifty in-jokes to carry us along the way. Happily, in deference to the look and feel of the original film, Spielberg and his team have approached the special effects from a very physical stunt-focused vantage, giving centre stage to fights and chases rather than to an overload of computer-generated imagery. When the CGI does come, it’s at the end of the film, and by the time one gets there, one has been so whipped up in the excitement of it all that one hardly notices the move from leaping and running to watching the computers do their stuff.

Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull had a lot to live up to, and in my opinion it’s succeeded splendidly – it has retained the spirit of the beloved 1981 original, and its star has proved, just as Bruce Willis recently did with Die Hard 4.0, that even guys over 50 can still be terrific big-screen heroes. As great popcorn fun executed flawlessly, Indiana Jones part four is a blast from beginning to end.

Nick Prescott