Pirates of the Caribbean 2: Dead Man’s Chest

Talent: Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, Keira Knightley, Tom Hollander, Bill Nighy, Stellan Skaarsgard, Jack Davenport.

Writer/director/editor: Gore Verbinski
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 150 minutes
We rate it: Two stars.


I would like to state emphatically, for the record, that I loved the first Pirates of the Caribbean film. Made by director-for-hire Gore Verbinski in 2003, Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl was a breathlessly entertaining Hollywood concoction in the finest comic-matinee tradition. It moved its wonderfully engaging and fantastical story along at mile-a-minute pace, it put its attractive cast through its paces in wry and rollicking fashion, and it never let its wonderful special effects get in the way of the terrific comic banter. How on earth the filmmakers thought they’d be able to top that lot is anyone’s guess, but in my opinion the effort to do so has been spectacularly unsuccessful.

The first film was produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, you see, and if there’s one thing you can bet on with a Bruckheimer film these days, it’s the fact that if it makes a lot of money, there will without question be a sequel. Or, better yet, two sequels: Pirates of the Caribbean 2 and 3 have reputedly been shot back to back, with the third entry in the franchise to hit the world’s screens within the next few months. Verbinski has rightly been engaged as director of the sequels, and it’s not exactly his fault that this new entry in the series is so disappointing – what has been lost amid the enormous budget is the sense of just how much the original’s terrific screenplay added to the fun.

So what is this one all about? Well to begin with we have the lively cast of characters to which we were introduced in the first film: the hilarious Captain Jack Sparrow (an absolutely inspired Johnny Depp sporting dreadlocks and Keith Richards’ accent), heroic young swordsmith Will Turner (Orlando Bloom), Will’s beloved, the feisty Elizabeth Swan (Keira Knightley) and a ragtag bunch of deckhands and sailors whose able banter and constant moaning about their working conditions is still present. The cast showed its skills brilliantly in number one, and the mood between them is much the same here, though the actors have been given far less witty material to work with. New villains have been introduced, too, in the form of Bill Nighy (playing Davy Jones, yes, he of the locker) and Tom Hollander as a malevolent representative of the East India Company. In addition, there is an enormous squid-like Kraken that
periodically emerges from the ocean’s depths to turn a ship into splinters and suck its crew down into the deep blue void.

So our beloved gang is re-introduced with some new players as well, and in a plot setup that is genuinely too convoluted and logic-defying to even attempt to explain, our Pirates find themselves sent on a complex series of missions to save Jack from cannibals, trick Davy Jones out of his claim on Jack’s soul, and re-unite the lovers Will and Elizabeth, all the while staying out of the clutches of both the Kraken and the East India Company. It sounds like a lot of fun on paper, but on screen it’s an unbelievable mess.

The digital effects wizards have been at it again, and this film suffers enormously from what one might call CGI-overkill. The sequences where the Kraken strikes are quite spectacular, but by about the third appearance the beastie makes on screen, the audience begins to tire of it, and to hanker for more of the witty character interplay that made the first film so charming. Nighy’s Davy Jones, too, is a largely digital creation, and while the actor gives his usual enviable performance, one has the sad feeling that much of that performance has been lost under the layers of digital animation that have been plastered all over the actor’s face. Depp struggles, too, and gives an uncharacteristically stilted performance, especially in the early scenes; he takes quite a while to settle back into the role, and as a result, the first half hour of the film really does seem quite uninspired and lifeless.

For me, this film proved once again that enormous budgets do not necessarily translate into enormously entertaining films. There is so much overkill on screen here, from the needlessly complex plot that one struggles to keep up with, to the interminable CGI sequences that truly become boring and empty. With the simplicity and cleverness of the original film still fresh in the audience’s minds, it will be a mighty surprise if this one satisfies audiences in the same way.

Nick Prescott