

“We’re all a pack of strays”

By Joanne Laurier
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The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou, directed by Wes Anderson; written by Anderson and Noah Baumbach

Wes Anderson’s, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, is an offbeat and humane comedy loosely referencing the famous French oceanographer Jacques Cousteau. Anderson, whose previous works include *Rushmore* (1999) and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), has created a fable-like aquatic realm, in which themes close to his heart rise above the fanciful.

Jacques Cousteau (1910-1987) introduced millions of landlocked people to the mysteries of the sea aboard his famous vessel, “The Calypso,” with his television series, “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau,” and his many documentaries. The environmentalist and scuba pioneer co-invented the aqualung, developed a one-person, jet-propelled submarine and helped organize the first manned undersea colony. Anderson explains in an interview that he was attracted to the oceanographer, in part, for his role in World War II as a French Resistance fighter.

Refracting reality, Anderson’s Steve Zissou (Bill Murray)—who is a bit of a showboat chronically off-course—appears to be washed up as the first part of his latest documentary encounters a stony reception at its premiere in Rome (of all places). In response, Zissou sets out to prepare a voyage that will film one last exploration to salvage his reputation and avenge the death of his friend and long-time partner Esteban du Plantier (Seymour Cassel). Esteban was consumed by the fantastical Jaguar Shark for which Zissou has developed an Ahab-like obsession. The creature, as Zissou is constantly reminding everyone, may or may not exist.

The scientist plans the excursion from his compound on Pescespada Island and tries to ready, as much as possible, his half-functioning boat, the Belafonte—a former mine-sweeper (Harry Belafonte=calypso singer=“The Calypso”).

Team Zissou is comprised of the oceanographer’s wife and Vice President of The Zissou Society, Eleanor—the brains of the operation (Anjelica Huston); the emotional, shorts-sporting German engineer Klaus Daimler (Willem Dafoe); the opportunist film producer, Oseary Drakoulias (Michael Gambon); and Pelé dos Santos (Seu Jorge), the Brazilian Safety Expert who serenades the boat’s crew. Others include the bare-breasted script girl and the bewildered, unpaid interns. Mandatory attire is a Cousteau-ish red cap and bright-blue jumpsuit. Speedos are doled out for the right public relations occasion. In fact, all Zissou-aggrandizing moments are to be recorded by the ship’s lovingly browbeaten film crew.

Before the Belafonte sets out to sea, strangers start cropping up. An “Air Kentucky” pilot, Ned Plimpton (Owen Wilson)—like someone out of a Civil War novel—appears claiming to be Zissou’s illegitimate son. He has been a lifelong fan of the explorer and joins the team. Zissou renames him Kingsley Zissou. A pregnant British journalist, Jane Winslett-Richardson (Cate Blanchett), mysteriously shows up on assignment to write a magazine cover story. Another last minute addition to the voyage is the “bond company stooge,” Bill Ubell (Bud Cort).

High seas adventures include confrontations with Filipino pirates and Zissou’s arch rival, Alistair Hennessey (Jeff Goldblum), a far more commercially successful oceanographer and Eleanor Zissou’s former husband. When Eleanor leaves the Zissou boat suffering from relationship fatigue, she encamps at Hennessey’s estate in Port-au-Patois. Cody, a scruffy, three-legged dog is left behind on the Belafonte by the pirates and assists in their quirky demise. The odyssey ends with a tragedy, a few reconciliations and a general rally behind Zissou’s regained status as his deep sea nemesis is discovered to exist.

Visual enthusiasm is the hallmark of *The Life Aquatic*

. The undersea world is magically stylized with electric jellyfish, Rat Tail Envelope Fish—which turn inside out—Sugar Crabs and the strange Jaguar Shark. The vintage World War II Belafonte, with its cutaway wall revealing innumerable rooms and activity, is a particular highlight. The laboratory, kitchen, editing room, observation bubble are simultaneously visible, making the ship, as the film’s production notes state, essentially another character. The score featuring Brazilian singer/actor Seu Jorge singing David Bowie songs in folk-style Portuguese adds to the film’s peculiar emotionalism.

At times, the movie’s uneven comic tempo is out of sync with the compassionate performances of its actors. Murray as Zissou is an effective combination of narcissism and vulnerability, seemingly incapable of introspection. The passionately unperturbed Huston is wonderful as Eleanor, an aristocratic scientist. Owen Wilson plays it straight as the genteel and naive Ned Plimpton/Kingsley Zissou, whose unswerving purity gives Team Zissou a much needed revitalization. Dafoe’s Teutonic Klaus is alternately sweet and foreboding.

It is, however, Cate Blanchett who excavates the most important truths in her portrayal of Jane Winslett-Richardson. The character’s aggressive, screechy voice is odd and funny, yet tinged with pathos: Jane reading Proust aloud, attempting to culturally nourish her unborn child is unforgettable. Blanchett proves to be the most capable of breathing life into Anderson’s peculiar universe. The final shot of Jane holding her newborn on the deck of the Belafonte encapsulates much of what the filmmaker is trying to convey about fantasies, desires, frustrations and his general antipathy for existing reality.

Despite loss of life, relationships and careers, the characters huddle together, negotiating uncharted waters in a submersible bubble at the film’s conclusion. One reviewer suggests that Jane’s amniotic fluid is akin to Anderson’s metaphoric ocean where human connection is possible.

The film’s disparate elements don’t always mesh; nonetheless, this is a moving work. Its creators adopt an approach of literary artifice to defend imagination, free play and unbridled enthusiasm. A child’s fresh method of viewing the world at times defies logic, but always yields magical and rewarding treasures.

The Life Aquatic deals centrally with the alienation inherent in social and family relations. Zissou and Eleanor can never seem to get beyond the minutiae of the immediate; Jane embarks on the Belafonte ambivalent about a pregnancy that stems from an unhappy liaison. She is attracted to Ned’s surreal innocence and repulsed by Zissou’s desperation and insensitivity.

For Anderson, relationships that are biologically imposed are the most problematic of all. When Ned asks Zissou why he never tried to contact him, knowing that he was his son, Zissou replies: “Because I hate fathers, I never wanted to be one.” As it turns out, Zissou has always been sterile. No matter, in the end, a real bond, surpassing any biological imperative, has been cultivated with Ned.

The giant, disinfected vessel of Alistair Hennessey, and his starched, militaristic crew—contrasting with Zissou’s motley setup—says something about the soulless, overbearing nature of wealth. The better-financed oceanographer may eclipse Zissou on the material level, but there is no contest when it comes to a genuinely felt existence. Only when Hennessey loses everything can he access his humanity.

Anderson’s film is not an entirely successful effort, but there is something liberating and deeply affecting about his method of work and that of his collaborators. Cody, the three-legged dog, symbolizes certain positive qualities that Anderson and company see in struggling humankind—an irrepressible determination and basic goodness that can overcome any mental or physical handicap. Under present circumstances this may seem somewhat skimpy, but in its disdain for all that is materially and psychically false, staid and conformist, *The Life Aquatic of Steve Zissou* is more than commendable.

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