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Johnny Depp in "Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides."

## 'Stranger Tides' treads familiar waters

Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides

BY MATTHEW RODGERS  
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

It appears that since The Black Pearl docked in "At World's End" in 2007, it has become quite fashionable to lambaste this doubloon-boarding franchise as a never ending theme park ride.

Admittedly, Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow had become an increasingly indulgent and out of control performance that was once nominated for an Oscar. The trilogy had also got its globe-trotting plot

strands more tangled than the Kraken's tentacles by the end, and Orlando Bland, sorry Bloom, and company had become stale by the time we reached the confusing conclusion.

But there's no denying that when "Pirates" peaked during "Dead Man's Chest," it was live-action Looney Tunes lunacy of the highest order, and I for one was ready to set sail once more.

This time around, Jack (Depp) has been ensconced by Richard Griffith's King George II to find the fabled fountain of youth. He is joined by Black Pearl nemesis Captain Barbosa (Geoffrey Rush), who is now working for the monarchy, and pursued by history's most fearsome pirate, Blackbeard (Ian McShane). Blackbeard has Jack's former flame in tow in

the shapely shape of Angelica (Penelope Cruz), and they are all in a high seas race against time to cheat death.

Whoever came up with the title should be made to walk the plank. There's nothing "stranger" about these tides—if anything it's all a little too familiar, something of a Greatest Hits of the Caribbean. But compared to the bloat of "At World's End," that might not be such a bad thing.

For one, Depp appears to have reined Jack in a little. Here he comes across more heroic, though still morally dubious and mincing, but the one-liners are spread more evenly throughout the story, thus increasing their effect and reducing the pantomime dame results that irked during previous voyages.

New captain/director Rob Marshall has also addressed the plot issues, creating a more linear narrative as opposed to Gore Verbinski's wayward compass. It still clumsily goes from set-piece to set-piece, but at least the audience can understand what's going on this time.

There are some welcome creative touches too. The mermaids are a wonderful addition, rendered brilliantly and with juxtaposition between their beauty and their evil intentions. It's the stuff of Brothers Grimm fairytales. They are also at the centre of the film's most impressive sequence, during which a boat full of unsuspecting grog-swiggers are picked off by the submerged seductresses.

Of the new crew members, McShane hardly makes any kind

of impression as the supposedly threatening Blackbeard, failing to usurp the brilliance of Rush's returning Barbosa. Cruz on the other hand brings some welcome sex appeal, sassy one-liners, and a well overdue love interest for Sparrow.

"On Stranger Tides" struggles from an overriding feeling that the whole escapade is completely unnecessary, always feeling like a spin-off with a plot lifted from "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and any number of "get the map, find the maguffin" movies. Having said that, this is one "Pirates" movie that comes recommended.



Ashton Kutcher  
STEPHEN LOVEKIN/GETTY IMAGES

### Ashton Kutcher takes over for Charlie Sheen

Television and film actor Ashton Kutcher, 33, has joined the cast of the troubled hit television comedy "Two and a Half Men." Best known for his work on the sitcom "That 70's Show," Kutcher remarked about his new project in a press statement, saying: "I can't wait to get to work with this ridiculously talented 2.5 team, and I believe we can fill the stage with laughter that will echo in viewers' homes."



Jenna Fischer  
FREDERICK M. BROWN/GETTY IMAGES

Jenna Fischer expecting child  
Comedic television star Jenna Fischer, 37, who plays Pam Beesly on "The Office," is expecting her first child with husband Lee Kirk according to "People" magazine. The couple married in 2010 in a quiet ceremony after two years of dating. This will be their first child.



Robert De Niro  
PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN/GETTY IMAGES

### Robert De Niro in talks to play Madoff

Oscar-winning legend Robert De Niro, 67, is reportedly in talks with HBO to produce and possibly star in a film about Bernie Madoff, says The Hollywood Reporter. The film will be based on the book "The Wizard of Lies: Bernie Madoff and the Death of Trust" by Diane Henrique, which was released last month.

COMPILED BY  
MICHELE GONCALVES  
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## Female comedy balances humour with heart

'Bridesmaids'

BY HELENA CHAO  
EPOCH TIMES STAFF

Producer Judd Apatow's latest film perfectly balances laugh-out-loud comedy with more serious life challenges, similar to "Funny People" but centred on a realistic portrayal of adult female friendships.

After stealing scenes in "Knocked Up," Kristen Wiig of "Saturday Night Live" was approached by Apatow to write and star in her own film. Kristen and longtime friend

Annie Mumolo collaborated on the script and decided to tell a behind-the-scenes tale of female friendships and the not-so-glamorous side of being a bridesmaid.

Annie (Wiig) is a 30-something woman whose life is falling apart. Her bakery recently went out of business, her boyfriend left her shortly thereafter, and her roommate (played by ever hysterical Matt Lucas from the "Little Britain" series) kicks her out.

Then her best friend, Lillian (Maya Rudolph), surprises her with news of her engagement. And while Annie is thrilled for Lillian, her own failures and insecurities become magnified as she

Wiig and Mumolo ultimately created a story with heart, strong characters, and room for plenty of improvised comedy.

serves as maid of honour.

Hilarity and chaos ensues in a series of disasters, as Annie quickly becomes the maid of "dishonour" after well-intentioned plans go awry. Annie's arch nemesis, Helen (Rose Byrne), seemingly has the perfect life—married to a wealthy business magnate, beautiful, thin, and fashionable. The two fight for Lillian's affections, and the audi-

ence is treated to some serious side-splitting comedy, some of it a little gratuitous but nonetheless a pleasant surprise from a film with an ensemble of female stars.

Wiig and Mumolo ultimately created a story with heart, strong characters, and room for plenty of improvised comedy. It's groundbreaking in that it's one of the first female-focused com-

edies that will appeal equally to women and men, thanks to producer Apatow's brilliant nose for universal humour.

While certain scenes seem long and overdone, "Bridesmaids" is an enjoyable and funny film that is easy to relate to. The cast is hysterical, and certain token scenes will be seared in your mind forever (not necessarily in a good way).

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