Movie Review: The Revenant

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Alejandro Gonzalez Innaritu
2015

Again, I realise this flick has been out for oh so long, and various awards have been awarded and such, but I enjoyed the flick so much that I felt compelled to write about it.

Regardless of the absurd level of hype, and this was ridiculously overhyped, which is very strange considering what the flick was like and is actually about, this turned out to be a very enjoyable film for me that succeeds despite Leonardo DiCaprio, rather than because of him.

The movie around him, the amazing cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki, the relentlessness of the very landscape around them, they all combine to deliver an awe-inspiring vision of frontier times. The story didn’t really resonate with me all that much, but I guess the performances, especially of Tom Hardy, Domhnall Gleason and Will Poulter, were solid. But the real main character? Nature, baby. C’mon, sparkle for me. Work it, sub-zero tundra!

This is set in the early 1800s, and it’s meant to be North Dakota in the States. The thing is, though, I don’t even have to look it up on imdb.com or Wikipedia to know that they must have filmed this in Canada. There is not a shred, a scintilla, a skerrick of a doubt in my mind that it was Canada. Whenever they want to film something that looks this amazing, and which tries to convince the viewer that humans who travel to these regions voluntarily are idiots, they film in these bits of Alberta.

And that’s a crucial element for success, at least for me, when you’re putting together a film like this set in frontier times. The whole point of a film set in frontier times is to show how goddamn hard getting through a single day would be even if someone hadn’t been catastrophically fucked up by a bear.

But now I’m leaping ahead. This is allegedly based on a true story, but, I’m telling you, there is no way this movie even matches the lies that Hugh Glass told way back when. But there was once a chap called Hugh Glass, and he was attacked by a bear, and he was treated horribly by a chap called Fitzgerald (here played by Tom Hardy). But there the two tales diverge.

You have to remember now that the director of this flick and the cinematographer are complete and utter show offs these days. I mean, they probably always were, it’s just that now they have all the money and all the awards, and all the technology at their disposal to deliver amazing visual experiences. Hence the beginning of this flick shows a bunch of hunters and trappers, including Glass, being attacked by the locals.

I’m deliberately underplaying things. That scene is incredible, utterly incredible, in that everything that is going on and being done (much of it horribly violent, of course) is depicted from an astounding perspective, and with a 3D field of vision like nothing I’ve seen before. Yes, of course, people compare it to the opening of Saving Private Ryan and the work that Spielberg and his usual cinematographer Janusz Kaminski got up to there (with the help of hundreds of actors, thousands of support staff and millions of programmers). But this sequence, this amazing sequence, is a different beast altogether.
Let’s not pretend that this flick is some kind of indie low budget art house flick? it had a budget akin to a superhero movie? so the difference isn’t in funds. The technology, especially CGI, has advanced immensely since the 90s. But there’s also a difference of perspective at play. As astounding as some of the perspectives are, they, being the filmmakers, endeavour to keep the field of view and perspective, and the composition, as always slightly off centre, to emphasise how whatever is happening, is happening to the protagonist. This always keeps things, despite the vastness of the landscape, to a very human dimension.

Glass may be a complicated character. He doesn’t really need to be, for the purposes of this film. All he really has to do is suffer, and suffer tremendously, and keep going. The word ?revenant? refers to someone who returns from the dead, but in a horrible state, not like a sexy twinkling vampire that teenage girls and their middle-aged mothers can fantasise about while masturbating.

Not that there’s anything wrong with that. There’s nothing sexy about what happens to Hugh Glass here. It’s one long (mostly CGI) shot as this is happening to him. A mother bear and her cubs just happen to be strolling along, when an evil DiCaprio comes tauntingly close to their personal space. Said mother bear ?Get the fuck away from my kids?, and hilarity ensued.

No, wait, the opposite, in fact. That bear does some terrible things to Glass, terrible things, and it’s simultaneously amazing and harrowing to watch, like many great things in life. Damn, is it hardcore. It is, like most completely uneven fights, completely unbelievable that the protagonist would survive such a mauling, but hey, this is the magic of cinema on display.

Glass ends up getting his revenge on nature, but the toll it has taken on him is immense. He bears open, long gouges all over his torso, and a throat pretty much not really all there any more. They do the (unfortunately) ?classic? gimmick of showing a victim trying to drink, and having the liquids not follow the normal human trajectories in order to show how bad the damage is. Think Two Face in The Dark Knight, drinking whiskey in order to display how few fucks he now gives even with only half a face remaining (ie. none), or the vile Captain in Pan’s Labyrinth, leaking booze from where he shouldn’t (and yet it makes us so glad).

Glass then does some frontier cauterisation on himself, and, at least for a moment, the film transcends from grim seriousness to high comedy, at least for me. Is that wrong? Should I be worried?

I was already sold on this flick before then, so it didn’t worry me too much. What did worry me was that I thought DiCaprio, convinced that this was his very last chance for an Oscar, was going to act all over the place and probably be yelling a lot as well. I needn’t have worried. That big, beautiful bear does such great damage to Glass’s vocal chords that I no longer had anything to worry about.

And yet there is still ever so much more film to see. Two men are tasked with looking after the grievously wounded Glass. Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy) and some other guy. Fitzgerald is That Guy, the one who complains about everything and anything and never shuts the fuck up. He’s been wounded terribly himself in the past by the natives, who tried to scalp him alive. That would turn anyone into a bit of a prick, don’t you think? Even Mother Theresa, I would hesitate to remark.

Fitzgerald is not only out for Number One, himself, at all times, but he’s incredibly greedy and incredibly against being told what to do. He’s also a dirty murdering son of a bitch. So, yes, this flick is meant to be all about the revenge of Glass on Fitzgerald, for a reason I won’t go into, because it’s so awful, but it’s about so much more than that, and perhaps to the flick’s detriment.

I could easily sit through this flick another three times in a row, which would take about half a day to do, and it would be a pleasurable experience for me. Still, it’s pretty bonkers weird. Apart from a frontier tale told about trying to live at a time when everything and everyone around you is screaming ?Die! Die! Die!?, the script does try to get all mythic and mystical and shit.
Hence the Three Rebirths of Hugh Glass, which is what I'm sure the flick should have been called. There are three instances as Glass goes along his horrible journey where he ends up in makeshift wombs, from which he is unceremoniously expelled like any other infant. First it's the early grave Fitzgerald forces him into. Later on, a kind Pawnee builds a lean-to in order to let him heal and once more be thrust out into the world.

The third, and probably weirdest, involves Glass actually having to squeeze himself out of the belly of a creature, which is more Empire Strikes Back than biblical or native American myth. It is so strange that it uncomfortably lingered in the mind, because it's the most explicit, in that it's almost like Innaritu is saying 'well, if you didn't get the symbolism before, I'm going to make it SO GODDAMN OBVIOUS that even you morons texting each other up the back will get it?. Glass literally squeezes himself out of something that looked awfully like a vagina.

Someone spank that baby on the butt. The ending seems to be subverting its own premise, and yet it's even more in keeping with the actual true tale of Hugh Glass, rather than what the watchers of a so-called revenge thriller are meant to expect. Little did they know that this was about someone becoming Enlightened through rebirth, and enjoying the icy scenery along the way. It's a visual marvel. Dunno whether DiCaprio deserved any awards just for being tortured for several weeks. Hardy does far more acting in it that DiCaprio does, and where's his award, huh? Where's his parade?

8 times the ice and snow of Alberta is clearly not a fit place for man or beast out of 10

~The way I see it, I done saved your life twice now, boy... I ought to be God to you.~? ? yeah, well, I ain't hiring ~ The Revenant
Rating: 8 stars


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