

James Franco, Danny Boyle Elevate Harrowing Saga of '127 Hours'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – What separates us during extreme danger? Why do some people collapse under the weight of likely death while others push forward and make it out alive? What fuels the will to survive to the point that it can do the unimaginable? Aron Ralston has surely thought about his personal answers to these questions and Danny Boyle's riveting film about his defining incident, "127 Hours," now brings them to millions of captivated fans in theaters around the world.

With a career-best and possibly Oscar-worthy lead performance from James Franco, "127 Hours" tells Ralston's amazing story in a way that only Boyle could do. One of our most "alive" filmmakers uses that energy to both transport us to a nightmarish situation and give us not just the desire but the need to make it out alive. At its best, "127 Hours" is transporting in the way it puts us right in the middle of Aron Ralston's ordeal and perfectly conveys what forced him to make a decision that many of us couldn't conceive.

Much has been made about the festival responses to "127 Hours" that have included people passing out during the climactic scene in which Ralston self-amputates his arm in order to save his life. Why has there been such a visceral response? It's not purely the gore or the intensity of the scene. There's gorier material on basic cable. It's the fact that by the time "127 Hours" reaches that headline-grabbing moment, Boyle, Franco, and the team behind the film have made Aron real. He's not just another character. We cringe and some of us even pass out because we feel like it's genuine. There's something amazing about being able to shock the generally-jaded audiences of 2010. "127 Hours" can be pretty amazing.



127 Hours

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

As you might imagine, the plot of "127 Hours" is pretty straightforward: It's the way that Boyle, Franco, cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle, and writer Simon Beaufoy (both Oscar winners for "Slumdog Millionaire") build upon the foundation of well-known plot that makes the film a success. One day, Aron Ralston (James Franco) went out for climbing and hiking. He slipped on a boulder into a chasm and his arm was pinned underneath an immovable rock. He made a decision that would make most of us dizzy to even consider.

How do you turn what is essentially the story of one man into a relatable tale for millions? The theme that Boyle and Beaufoy have pulled from Aron's saga and what really makes the film tick is that of community. The film opens with fast-paced shots of millions of people commuting via train, car, foot, etc. Boyle includes the shots both as a counter to the solitude that Ralston would soon feel but also to make clear that the lesson that Aron learned was simple – we need other people. Sometimes we need help. We can't all be that lone adventurer that Aron clearly envisioned himself to occasionally be. The final act, in which Ralston learns that it's not just the people he knows but those he hasn't met yet that give him a reason to live, is powerfully moving.

Boyle and his regular collaborators have made a technically-accomplished film to be sure although if there's a flaw with the work it's that they sometimes flash their technical prowess a bit too proudly. "127 Hours" sometimes plays too frenetically with split screens, different film stocks, quick cuts, and musical cues, but there's a clear reason for Boyle's overly artistic style with the film: They are chances for us to catch our breath and remind us that we're watching a movie. I think some people may wish that the film was more "realistic" and less flashy but they may not be fully considering what they're asking for in terms of brutal filmmaking. This is not that movie. It's not as dark as it could be in that it's constantly "letting the audience off the hook" by flashing back or quick-cutting instead of just being the "man under boulder" angle another filmmaker might have taken with the same material.



127 Hours

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

And yet there's clearly something that's connecting with audiences. Several critics have already written about watching the amputation through the cracks between their fingers and there are the aforementioned faintings reported at screenings nationwide. I believe most of this intense attachment to the fate of Aron Ralston can be credited to James Franco. The mega-talented actor who has displayed an incredible range from "Milk" to "Pineapple Express" to "Howl" gives the best performance of his career, immediately making Ralston a three-dimensional, believable character, which makes his story that much more powerful. "127 Hours" doesn't work if we only seen an actor pretending to be hurt. Franco conveys the saga of Aron Ralston in a way that should win him multiple awards at the end of the year. It's a tour-de-force performance.

With technical elements that are beyond impressive and a lead performance that stands as the best of the year to date, "127 Hours" is nearly perfect. I believe there are a few too many stylistic flourishes (although don't think there should have been none) and they hold the film back from being as truly memorable as it could have been, but it's a minor complaint for another great piece of work from Mr. Boyle and Mr. Franco, two men clearly at the top of their game.

'127 Hours' stars James Franco, Amber Tamblyn, and Kate Mara. It was written by Danny Boyle & Simon Beaufoy and directed by Boyle. It opens in Chicago on November 12th, 2010. It is rated R.



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