

## Tensionless ‘Water For Elephants’ Fatally Mismatches Leads, Casts Spot-On Supporters

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – While Robert “Twilight” Pattinson has persuasively branched out beyond his typecasting of reanimated and preternatural corpses, his miscast union in the tensionless “Water for Elephants” with pin-up circus spectacle Reese Witherspoon works as well as an elephant trying to spoon a sworn-enemy lion.

Despite an uneven plot progression that theatrically only brings a comatose life to Sara Gruen’s 2006 best-selling historical novel, sadistic ringmaster Christoph Waltz (Oscar winner for Quentin Tarantino’s “Inglourious Basterds”) and flashback story teller Hal Holbrook (Oscar nominated for Sean Penn’s “Into the Wild”) are the film’s only redeeming salvations.



Reese Witherspoon (left) and Robert Pattinson in “Water for Elephants”.

*Image credit: David James, 20th Century Fox*

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Waltz, who’s hopelessly haunting in 2009’s “Inglourious Basterds” as the film’s principal Nazi nemesis, resuscitates similar gestures and speech patterns. While he’s playing a very similar character within a completely different and convoluted traveling circus story, he’s the primary character who’s making interesting use of his supporting screen time. Casting and then dropping Sean Penn for a Waltz replacement is one of the few things this film got right.

While the film doesn’t delve into compelling book developments such as the revelation that Waltz’s character (August) is actually a paranoid schizophrenic, so does it only glance over the literary themes of a love triangle, trialing a man’s moral compass, circus life during the depression, mental illness, emotions versus clear-mindedness, self-worth and illusion versus reality. Gruen’s decision to aptly name Jacob (played in the film by Pattinson) is drawn from the backbone of the story’s parallels to the biblical story of Jacob in the Book of Genesis.

Pattinson and Witherspoon appear to be here just to get paid. The film never realizes a true chemical potential between them because it doesn’t exist. The prude, sexless duo should study how couples like Keira Knightley and James McAvoy bubbled up frenzied salacity in “Atonement”.



Christoph Waltz (left) and Reese Witherspoon in “Water for Elephants”.

*Image credit: David James, 20th Century Fox*

Writer Richard LaGravenese and director Francis Lawrence tragically shaft Hal Holbrook by only granting him a few minutes at the beginning and end of a melodrama in which you could snooze through an attempt at its middle meat. Toward the end of his life, he’s discussing memoirs from 70 years ago of a currently “90- or 93-year-old” protagonist living in a nursing home. Holbrook’s eyes lure you into caring about his story for a microscopic moment while the rest of the film bombs at exploding the ember he briefly sparks.

The film even fails to win “cute animal” points (there’s an attempt made with a dwarf’s Jack Russell Terrier named Queenie) and only scores a couple caring moments for its acts of animal cruelty. And while this film blunders at descending you into what should be an intriguing and mysterious rabbit hole, we’re reminded of stories like “Moulin Rouge!” where such a subculture of illusionary entertainment is triumphantly traversed.

Instead, we’re left to create little-known observations in “Water for Elephants” such as the mention of the city of Altoona, Penn. acquiring the financially beleaguered Benzini Brothers circus that strived to supersede the premier Ringling Brothers.





Robert Pattinson in “Water for Elephants”.

*Image credit: David James, 20th Century Fox*

Altoona is a population 47,176 city that most people have never heard of until literally and ironically this month when “Super Size Me” director Morgan Spurlock [temporarily renamed it to the title of his latest film](#) [18]. For 60 days and \$25,000, Altoona currently has the long-winded name of POM Wonderful Presents The Greatest Movie Ever Sold, Penn.

The character Rosie had promise. She’s one of the film’s standout stars whose name you don’t know. You’ve probably never seen her film work before and she’s unlikely to have directly received a payday for her work here. She’s the film’s talented, human-like and non-English-understanding elephant.

While Rosie is purchased after the Cornell veterinarian dropout (Pattinson) puts down the show’s star horse, Rosie is initially deemed a financially ruinous investment due to her inability to create a new cash cow for the traveling circus. Thankfully, this mega bull understands Polish – which coincidentally is the same language in which Pattinson’s character is fluent – and even entertainingly performs to Polish circus commands.



Robert Pattinson (left) and Reese Witherspoon in “Water for Elephants”.  
Image credit: David James, 20th Century Fox

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Though bringing paper pages to the big screen requires understandable cuts and adaptations, we can’t forgive the awkward pacing in “Water for Elephants”. We can’t buy the progression that an emotionally distraught and wealthy Cornell boy – who’s moments away from finishing his degree – would give it all up to hop a train that just happened to launch him into the traveling circus. And then there just happened to be the injection of the classic Hollywood love story with the added contriver of forbidden attraction.

Based on the spinal column of a richly worthwhile novel, a catastrophically miscast lead duo and a vegetarian screen story only serve up scant droplets from this tale’s oceanic potential. Emile Hirsch and Channing Tatum (who auditioned for the role of Jacob) and Scarlett Johansson (who turned down Reese Witherspoon’s role as Marlena) all dodged the bullet that is this film’s train wreck.

*“Water for Elephants” stars Reese Witherspoon, Robert Pattinson, Christoph Waltz, Hal Holbrook, James Frain, Paul Schneider, Jim Norton, Mark Povinelli, Richard Brake, Stephen Taylor, Ken Foree, Scott MacDonald, Sam Anderson, John Aylward and Brad Greenquist from director Francis Lawrence and writer Richard LaGravenese based on the novel by Sara Gruen. The film, which is rated “PG-13” for moments of intense violence and sexual content, has a running time of 122 minutes. “Water for Elephants” opened everywhere on April 22, 2011.*



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