

## Johnny Depp is On, Story is Off in ‘The Rum Diary’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 27, 2011 - 5:55pm

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Johnny Depp has a Hunter S. Thompson obsession, that is career apparent. After playing the journalist’s alter-ego Raoul Duke in “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,” Depp gives a turn as Hunter’s younger self in a film based on Thompson’s 1998 novel, “The Rum Diary.”

Depp is game for the role, he must relish any turn in the gonzo journalist’s shoes. He is virtually in every frame and carries the movie grandly on his back, but the story surrounding him is muddled, disconnected and soft. There are some grand flourishes, but ultimately it comes down to defeating a hotel developer, which on the villain scale doesn’t exactly inspire an overwhelming opposing force.

The year is 1960 and a writer named Kemp (Depp) arrives in San Juan, Puerto Rico, because he is a failed novelist and needs a job. The only rag on the island is The San Juan Star, but it is the armpit of journalism, existing only to cater to their dwindling advertising interests. Kemp meets the staff, a gruff photographer named Sala (Michael Rispoli), a part-time religious editor named Moburg (Giovanni Ribisi) and the put-upon editor-in-chief Lotterman (Richard Jenkins). Kemp finds he needs a bigger challenge, and gets involved with a shady island bureaucrat named Sanderson (Aaron Eckhart).



L-R: Giovanni Ribisi, Johnny Depp and Michael Rispoli in 'Rum Diary'  
Photo credit: Peter Mountain for FilmDistrict and GK Films

Sanderson wants Kemp to plant stories about a new hotel development he is planning for a nearby island. There are several grifters involved in this project, but Kemp only has eyes for Sanderson’s comely girlfriend, Chenault (Amber Heard). And despite his claim that he is on the

“upper end of social drinking,” Kemp can’t help partying with the errant photographer Sala, and the trouble they run into will effect the potential deal that Sanderson and Kemp are trying to forge. The newspapermen, the femme fatale and the developers will all eventually clash.

This is a bit of the Mad Men era setting, mixed in with Hunter S. Thompson’s appetite for destruction. One of the more cognizant parts of the film is that the 48-year-old Depp can pull off a youngish reporter fresh off the boat. His Kemp is sly, cynical and horny, plus takes on all his adventures without any sense of moral implication. Depp absorbs the complete characterization, and he honors his old friend Thompson again with a personal tribute that is spot on.

It is the relationships in the film that are vague. There is not enough time or exposition in the multi-layered story to establish the kinship that creates connection between the characters or the audience. Richard Jenkins, as the San Juan Star chief editor, gets to spout off angry diatribes about his fish wrapper of a newspaper, but falls away for long periods, emerging in scenes with a completely different emotional tract. Kemp and Sala become drugging and drinking buddies, but oddly never seem together. Even the attempt to inject romance between Chenault and Kemp comes up cold.

There is too much story to mediate between the characters, and writer/director Bruce Robinson (“Withnail and I”) doesn’t give it the snap of a major conflict. Despite action scenes like cock fighting, car chases and comic driving, the narrative approach is perfunctory and the addition of the action is an attempt to add spice to a bland stew. Sanderson, for example, is personified as an evil greed merchant, but his actual process comes off more like just a business deal, which the last time I checked was and is the way of the world. Kemp’s contempt for Sanderson doesn’t fit in with the rest of his meanderings, but seems to exist only to expound upon the roots of the gonzo attitude in Hunter S., which in Kemp’s journey as presented wasn’t very likely.



Aaron Eckhart and Amber Heard in 'Rum Diary'  
Photo credit: Peter Mountain for FilmDistrict and GK Films

Amber Heard is radiant, and produces a party girl that follows up with everything we expect a party girl to be. Giovanni Ribisi completely puts his ill-defined Moburg character in over-the-top mode, appearing here and there when a scene needs to be broken up by a degenerate. Michael Rispoli, as the photographer sidekick, can’t deliver the juice of the character, even when sharing a mind-altering scene with Depp straight out of Terry Gilliam’s “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” playbook.

But there also is a nice use of beautiful old San Juan as a setting, and again Depp is a marvel to watch as the character. But like a decent song that is played too many times, the lyric and theme of the early Hunter S. Thompson loses its expression and dulls its own edge.

*“The Rum Diary” opens everywhere October 28th. Featuring Johnny Depp, Amber Heard, Aaron Eckhart, Michael Rispoli and Giovanni Ribisi. Based on a novel by Hunter S. Thompson. Adapted and directed by Bruce Robinson. Rated “R”*



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