

Emotionally Galvanizing ‘Titanic 3D’ Transcends Unnecessary Conversion

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – It takes more than expensive effects, super-sized egos and exhaustive marketing campaigns to seduce the world. For all of its visual splendor, James Cameron’s “Avatar” has already evaporated from most moviegoers’ memories. Its derivative romance and preachy messages were stretched so thin that they failed to achieve any resonant impact.

Cameron’s previous box office phenomenon, 1997’s “Titanic,” may be every bit as derivative, but it succeeds in the most crucial areas where “Avatar” fell distressingly short. Perhaps Cameron merely lucked out by casting Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, two actors who have proven to be among the most audacious and gifted of their generation. Perhaps a fact-based human story will always be more relatable than the plight of motion-capture creatures from a metaphorical planet of our discontent.

Yet upon viewing the film 15 years later, it’s clear that Cameron reached his peak both technically and artistically in the second half of this flawed yet often glorious picture. I was 12 when I first saw “Titanic” on video with my sister and parents. I’ll never forget peeking through my fingers during the infamous drawing scene and then being stunned into silence by the terrible grandeur of the ship’s slow descent toward its watery grave. Like the epic directors of Hollywood’s Golden Age, Cameron is as interested in the characters occupying the corners of the screen as he is with the star-crossed lovers at its center. There is one scene that has routinely moved me to tears every subsequent time I’ve seen “Titanic,” and it has nothing to do with the forbidden affair between wealthy but disillusioned Rose (Winslet) and penniless but idealistic Jack (DiCaprio). It takes place as chaos is engulfing the ship during its final hour, and a group of dedicated violinists decide to perform their last song together. As the sweetly mournful tones of their music drifts through the frigid air, Cameron cuts below deck to the trapped passengers making the most of their final moments together. An elderly couple embraces each other as water begins surging through the walls. A mother reads her children what she knows will be their final bedtime story. This unforgettable montage is the reason why “My Heart Will Go On” will never be the song that immediately comes to mind when I think of “Titanic.” It’s “Nearer, My God, To Thee.” It fit perfectly well in 1936’s classic disaster epic, “San Francisco,” and it works equally well here.



Kate Winslet stars in James Cameron's Titanic.

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

What doesn't quite work is the 3D transfer attached to this theatrical rerelease commemorating the 100th anniversary of the ship's sinking while providing Cameron with the opportunity to compete against himself for the title of Box Office King Of The World, thanks to inflated ticket prices. Even though the conversion is admittedly superior to the recent efforts of studios to capitalize on the 3D trend with 2D products, there are several shots in "Titanic" that look as if they're being peered at through a View-Master. No conversion, however skilled and meticulous, will ever be able to match the spectacular depth and detail of a film shot for 3D, such as Martin Scorsese's "Hugo."

At 3 hours and 14 minutes, "Titanic" is the sort of film that requires audiences to surrender themselves to its immersive power, but the 3D registers as a consistent distraction, particularly during the film's first third. It also accentuates the dated CGI figures inhabiting wide shots of the ship, especially during an early awkward match cut between Captain Smith (Bernard Hill) and a captain-like figure straight out of "The Sims." Yet I applaud Cameron for not trying to update his effects a la George Lucas, while allowing audiences to appreciate the innovative genius of his original achievements. The vast majority of the effects are still thoroughly convincing, though the moments that take place in between the expensive carnage prove to be even more galvanizing. Who can forget the chilling wide shot of the firework signaling for help in the midst of an empty sea, or the gradual zoom-out to a crowd of survivors desperately treading water while eliciting the sort of sound one often hears in a sports stadium?

However, during Rose and Jack's courtship, I began to wish that some of the wizards in Cameron's effects team could've digitally altered the characters' lips to deliver dialogue that wasn't so wince-inducing and crudely simplistic. There are moments when DiCaprio and Winslet can be visibly seen choking out their litany of groaners, including one exchange that was recycled in "Avatar" (Rose: "You have a gift, Jack. You see people." Jack: "I see you.>"). This sort of screenwriting approach works great in monosyllabic action blockbusters like "Terminator 2" and "Aliens" ("Hasta la vista, baby" and "Get away from her, you b—ch" are two bona-fide Cameron gems). But in a film that requires more than high five-worthy catchphrases, Cameron's dialogue falls very flat.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet star in James Cameron's Titanic.

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

And yet, incredible as it may seem, these demerits ultimately amount to little more than quibbles. That's because the visceral power and startling emotional impact of Cameron's overwhelmingly well-orchestrated spectacle transcends every undercooked element of the production. No wonder this film remained in U.S. theaters for ten straight months during its initial release. When viewed uninterrupted in the darkness of a theater filled with sniffing romantics, "Titanic" flourishes as a hypnotic out-of-body experience that could never be equaled on any Blu-ray player. The largeness of the screen allows little space for the audience's eyes to escape back into the real world, and I was astonished by the enhanced potency acquired by the film when viewed in its ideal venue. On four separate occasions during the film's final act, my eyes welled up to an obscene degree, and I suspect that James Horner's swooningly bittersweet music is largely to blame. I frankly can't remember the last score that pulled so rigorously and triumphantly on the heartstrings. It inspires tears like f-bombs inspire R ratings.

As the impossibly sweet heartthrob who wins his ticket to the titular ship in a poker game, DiCaprio has little to do apart from embodying a plucky life force. His work used to strike me as shallow, but upon recent viewing, I was struck by the actor's authentic blend of youthful charisma and vulnerability. DiCaprio's effortless magnetism brings out the best in Winslet, whose wooden early scenes give way to a memorable portrait of liberated sensuality. She rediscovers the joy of living right before she's forced to fight for every last drop of it. It's thrilling to watch Winslet hint at emotional depths she would later explore in meatier subsequent roles. Her expression of helpless longing as she's lowered in a lifeboat while DiCaprio glances at her from above is absolutely heartbreaking. What she decides to do next is a melodramatic moment for the ages.

Several of the supporting performances are equally stellar, particularly Frances Fisher's maddening portrayal of a mother who would rather sell off her daughter than give up her wealth, and Hill's shattering despair as the captain who silently watches in horror as his life's work turns to ruin. Billy Zane is efficiently sinister in his thankless roles as the gun-toting villain, though he would've been much scarier if Cameron had supplied the character with a glimmer of humanity. The weakest sections of the film (and the only ones that tend to drag) take place in the present day, as diamond hunter Brock (a deadly dull Bill Paxton) searches for the priceless Heart of the Ocean that once adorned the neck of Rose, beautifully played at age 101 by former screen siren Gloria Stuart, who nearly lived to the same age herself (dying in 2010 at age 100). Stuart's lined face has as much character and texture as the aging ship itself, which haunts the film in wondrous underwater footage.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Danny Nucci star in James Cameron's Titanic.

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Is “Titanic 3D” worth the full price of admission? At first, I was certain that my answer would be, “No,” since the 3D adds very little to the overall experience. But in my impassioned opinion, “Titanic 3D” does not sink or swim on the basis of its conversion alone, but on whether it’s worth seeing at all. That answer would be a resounding “Yes” on all counts. This is still one of the most impressive pictures ever made—flaws and all. It isn’t recycling beloved epics from Hollywood’s past—it’s channeling them, evoking them and in some ways, surpassing them. With documentaries and “Avatar” sequels overtaking the next several years of Cameron’s career, it’s doubtful that he will ever manage to equal this mammoth masterwork, just as George Lucas never equaled “Star Wars.” But that’s hardly a cause for complaint. Cameron has given the world a cinematic gift that keeps on giving. It remains one of the best films of this or any other year. No matter how much more money it rakes in, it’s still the king.

‘Titanic 3D’ stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet, Billy Zane, Kathy Bates, Frances Fisher, Bernard Hill, David Warner, Victor Garber, Bill Paxton and Gloria Stuart. It was written and directed by James Cameron. It was released April 4th in local theaters. It is rated PG-13.



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