

'Life of Pi' Offers Little More Than Stunning Visuals

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 20, 2012 - 4:13pm

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Ang Lee’s “Life of Pi” is a film that defies much critical thought in that it demands dismissal of such things in order to work. It is a story that needs to be transcendent in the way it transports the viewer through its fantastic tale that promises nothing less than evidence of God. It’s a work that I imagine some people will force themselves to enjoy largely because of the talented people who made it but if you think about it for more than a few seconds, it’s clear that this water-logged film is remarkably shallow.

First and foremost, Lee’s film looks great. It merits comparison to Martin Scorsese’s “Hugo” and James Cameron’s “Avatar” in the way it uses 3D technology to further theme and advance storytelling instead of as mere gimmick. However, the visuals can’t compensate for a story that often reeks of self-importance and presents a relatively simple fantasy disguised as a life-changing adventure. I don’t think I’d have as many problems as I do with “Pi” if I felt that Yann Martel and adapter David Magee weren’t so constantly reminding me of the faith-based importance of their tale. The very structure – a writer (Rafe Spall) visits a man named Pi (Irrfan Khan) to learn about how he survived an incredible shipwreck and met God in the process – is weighed down with ego. This is no mere fantasy for which the viewer can take away a lesson that they interpret on their own. It is a story for which its elements are remarkably defined, underlined, and presented as lesson for you to learn. It features such striking imagery and yet it tells so much more than it shows.



Life of Pi

Photo credit: Fox

The first act of “Life of Pi” is actually its best as Khan narrates some early anecdotes from Pi’s childhood. He grew up in a zoo and was always fascinated with aspects of various religions, choosing parts of each in which to believe. I loved this idea – that most religions have something worthwhile and that dismissing all others for one can lead to a narrow-minded view of the world. The teenage Pi (Suraj Sharma) travels with his family across the ocean for a move when the ship is involved in a Titanic-level disaster. Pi loses his family and finds himself on a lifeboat with a live tiger. Pi and the tiger have mutual needs and yet Pi knows that he could easily be food for the beast. Living together on the boat and trying to maintain a degree of hope, Pi actually trains the tiger and the two form a symbiotic relationship. The animal gives Pi something to do other than starve to death and Pi helps keep the tiger alive.

"Life of Pi" reminds me of the stories of Joel Coen's "A Serious Man." In that film, Larry Gopnik is looking for answers and he is given little more than religious parables that seem to offer him little to hold on to in life. "Life of Pi" is not unlike one of those film's stories in that it's presented as the answer to so many of the issues related to how we approach life, God, and tragedy. These are daring themes for a Hollywood production and the film certainly deserves credit for tackling them at all but it also sets up what should be a higher standard for it to live up to.



Life of Pi

Photo credit: Fox

Just bringing up God and faith and presenting them with visual style is not enough. Say something about religion. Say something about God. "Life of Pi" thinks it's a deep meditation about faith but it's really not. The book may be much richer (I haven't read it) just by virtue of the individual interpretation offered by fiction but visualizing Martel's tale takes what should have been a thematically rich piece and turns it into a relatively straightforward one, complete with a "here's what it all means" monologue at the end.

There are certainly technical elements to admire – including Mychael Danna's effectively used score and Tim Squyres' fluid editing – and if you're going to see "Life of Pi," you absolutely should do so in theater. The use of 3D, especially in the way that Lee even plays with aspect ratio while showing off his visual confidence, is gorgeous. There are frames of "Pi" that could be hung on the wall as art. And that's the way the film can be appreciated – as a beautiful visual experience. Looking any deeper than that only leads to disappointment.

"Life of Pi" stars Suraj Sharma, Irrfan Khan, Tabu, and Rafe Spall. It was directed by Ang Lee. It will be released on November 21, 2012.



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