

REEL

CRITIQUE

"King Arthur"

Starring Clive Owen, Keira Knightley, Ioan Gruffudd

Touchstone Pictures/Jerry Bruckheimer Films

Review by David Barry

Two months behind "Troy," "King Arthur" is the summer's second course of clanging swordfights and epic battles. "King Arthur," a PG-13 rated movie, probably maxes out its bloodshed quota with the MPAA. Unfortunately, there is little else to generate excitement in this dreary, two-hour slog through ancient Britain.

A brief history lesson at the movie's beginning reveals that Arthur and his knights were plucked from their homes in Eastern Europe as youths and sent to defend the Roman Empire's territory in Britain.

The movie jumps ahead 15 years and rejoins Arthur (Clive Owen) and his band of knights as they near the end of their military service to Rome. They are dark, bitter men, sick of fighting for Rome and ready to go home.

Before they are freed by their Roman masters, however, they



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Owen (right) and Knightley star in the action-adventure "King Arthur."

must complete one last mission—rescue a Roman official from a remote outpost before it is overrun by the murderous Saxons. At the Roman outpost, Arthur finds the lovely Guinevere (Keira

Knights) locked in a dungeon. A refreshingly strong-willed heroine, Guinevere quickly recovers from her incarceration and begins to cast lusty looks at Arthur and Lancelot (Ioan Gruffudd). Guinevere's legendary love triangle could have been more interesting, but the movie quietly shuffles that plotline to the bottom of the stack.

After all, there are more important things: The Saxons are approaching (we can hear them banging on their drums in the background), and that means the director can milk a few more scenes from the movie before the credits roll.

Some of the action scenes are fun to watch, like one battle between knights and Saxons on a frozen lake. Others are boring, predictable, with confusing, jumpy camerawork that makes for unpleasant viewing. The knights are a mixed bag of characters. Guinevere is believable as Arthur, and Gruffudd succeeds as handsome, noble Lancelot. His verbal jousting with Bors (Ray Winstone), the alleged father of as many as a dozen bastard children, provides a few light moments.

Bors tries to serve up the comic relief, but he is no knight of the Monty Python sort—his bawdy humor falls flat on its face. The only joke in the movie worth laughing at belongs to Guinevere, who remains knights, who receive only flashes of camera time, and is as lifeless as chess pieces.

Merlin (Stephen Dillane), the leader of the body-painting, forest-dwelling pagan Woads, plays a minor role in the scene first as enemy and then as ally of the knights. The real villain is left up to Cerdic (Stellan Skarsgard) and his ferocious Saxon army. Skarsgard manages to energize the plodding script, and his army maintains an invisible, driving presence that helps to carry the scenes along.

When the Saxons are off screen, and their presence is known only by the distant beating of drums, the audience may even get a tinge of suspense.

Unfortunately, that suspense is tossed aside once the army appears in the open, and "King Arthur" becomes another unimpressive good v. evil melee.

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