

**Kingdom of Heaven.** Directed by Ridley Scott. Starring Liam Neeson, Orlando Bloom, Jeremy Irons, Edward Norton, Eva Green (who?).

Well, lessee... We did *Troy*. We did *Alexander*. We did *Gladiator*. We did *Braveheart*. *Rob Roy*. *Merlin*. *Wyatt Earp*. It was time for the Crusades. Leader of the people (Bush, Urban II) ID's target of "crusade"; dumb gringos of dubious reputation stumble around Araby (Richard Lion-Heart, Geraldo); idiots take up the cause (Peter the Hermit, Sean Penn); annnnnnd... looks as if we get our Euro butts kicked out of the place, too... same as back in 1180-something. So it was time. Time, that is, to straighten out popular misconception the Crusades had anything to do with Christianity, Faith, Religion, or Salvation, not that there's a school left out there in SOL-land hasn't already clued in your poor cretin of a kid already. This lesson we get, along with some kinda (s)ecu(lar)menism soaked in Woolite™ and warm water, through the intersecting lives of second string players in the historical pano(d)rama, like, oh, say... the blacksmith who blows over to Holy Land become King of Jerusalem, flirt with Grandeur, Tolerance, *Deo Volente* (wasn't that the boat in *Thunderball*?), big Sword. Or the Queen of Jerusalem who blows over to... England become the blacksmith's wife, flirt with Childbed Fever, Premature Loss of Teeth, and Sheep Excrement in the Porridge. We fetch up—whether or not accurately a gaggle of heavy duty academics is weighing in (humorlessly) *ex cathedra* (Latin for: "Hey, Professor Plum... it's a flockin' movie...") even as you read this review—the brutality, the darkness, the superstition... the *smell* of Medieval life and mind on the one hand; on the other some upbeat (and pretty 1970's sounding) notions of how everything would be fine if only everything was swell since—if I get this right—"The Mosque is not to the Moslems; nor the Wall to the Jews; nor the Sepulcher to the Christians... these things belong to *none*... and to *all*!" And to all a good night. Not a bad idea, just not a Medieval one.

Howwwwwwever, the thin veneer of Hollywood Hallmark™ Hug-Me peeled off, it's a very watchable (even watchable *again*) movie. Orlando Bloom (whom I can't forgive for those ears in *Lord of the Rings*. Hey! James Dean was a brooding young ambisexual. Don't see *him* wandering around in pointy ears, do you? Well, all right...) gives a creditable (if admittedly his standard) performance as tightass if clueless sword-forged for which see *Pirates of Caribbean* (variously spelt) yet does appear to have bulked up for this outing from his hermaphroditic United Colors of Benetton waif to, well... believable blacksmith ecto- (or hecto- or meso- or one of them I can never remember which is which) -morphitude. The Desert: immense, soulless (what a place to be cradle of Monotheism), spectral, irresistible, home to benign Moslems squatting pastorally upon the Christian Holy Place, eager only to pry those dumbbo Christians loose of the Moslem Holy Place. The Church: venal, corrupt, mendacious, devious... I mean we open as a loathsome local priest lops off the head of a young fee-male suicide only to get a sword blank cherry-red from the forge plunged into his breast. Ouch! The Combat: frenetic mêlées between Paynims and Euros ardently butchering each other amid blood-slathered heroics that seem to be animate and not animated, if you catch my drift... that is, actual cast of thousands with real rubber swords and not animatronic with computer-generated uh... rubber swords. Medieval siege engines. British diction. Lepers. Did I say benign Moslems?

Sooooooo... young Belial (or something: Bloom), an intense blacksmith from Fluffshire loses his wife and baby only to find his crusader father, the nobleman Godfrey (Liam Neeson, doing another of his disappearing acts see for this *Gangs of New York* in which he surfaces, plants his seed so to speak, and checks out all in about three count 'em three minutes), war-weary and disillusioned but headed back to Jerusalem and determined to share with new-found son his cynicism and ennui. Some dads would give the kid a bicycle. But Godfrey cops it (ironically) in England at the hands of (ironically) Englishmen, leaving Belian to flounder (literally) ashore on his own, his lineage earning him audience with First Knight Tiberius (Jeremy Irons, sporting a great scar along with his patented Brit twit accent), then with Baldwin, the leper King of Jerusalem (Edward Norton, his face behind of a bronze mask for the whole thing till—oopsy daisy—it fall off and we get to see his leprosy kinda like a gummi bear™ left out in the sun and nibbled by ants). Baldwin's got a foot in the Jordan, so to speak, and on deck lurks Guy de Lusignan (bad guy and obviously—ptui!—French), the rightful heir and—speaking of rightful heir—married to the luscious Sibylla (Eva Green), exotic beauty who conceives (!) immediately a passion for Belian and as quickly consumates it... whoa!

All this, of course, and we ain't not got no Arabs yet. Belian spares the life of one as he blunders ashore, only to discover him later as Gassim (or something), Grand Vizir to Saladin (Omar Sharif to Alec Guinness, as it were), whose name we're determined to pronounce "Sal-ah-ha-deen," four syllables instead of three: the heavy hand—or lip, in this case—of that Yale History Department again (reminds me of when all the poseurs decided to spell "Socrates" Sokrates and pronounce "Celtic" Keltic... or "Brittany" Britney). And whoa! ...this Sala(ha)din opened the whole can of sinister (twinkie Middle East beard, broken nose, salient cheeks, sinuous lips, smallpox complexion and an accent so thick you could slice it with a scimitar variously spelt) but turns out to be a good guy. The real malefactors are the Christian barons Guy and Reynault (another—ptui!—Frenchman) who, in cahoots with the oily and duplicitous Bishop, conspire to "unseat" Baldwin (literally... his leprous royal butt sticks to the throne and peels off as he stands up... yeeeeee-uw!) and provoke The Battle with the Saracens. Into this mess blunders the blacksmith of Gumpshire—suddenly an ace swordguy cum expert on military engineering, siegeworks, pyrotechnics, and dogmatics but, hey...—swinging steel and slinging spiel (see above homily before the Last Fight). Well, hell... We lose Jerusalem (sorry to ruin it for you). But we keep our soul... annnnnnnnnnd the toothsome Sibylla (...a pleasant coinky-dinky: there's a reason "honour" and "amour" both spelt with a "u." Think about it!), who'll come back home to Whelpshire to reign with us among the scones and wattles where we can go back to hammering that anvil, so to speak, in primal peace.