

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. Directed by Wes Anderson (who also produced and wrote it). Starring Bill Murray, Angelica Huston, Owen Wilson, Cate Blanchett, Jeff Goldblum (who need to hop on that Stairmaster™), Willem Dafoe.

Bill Murray stole (then carried) *Ghost Busters* (both of them) and *Groundhog Day*, flicks you can watch over and over with profit, amusement: timing, delivery, dialogue, sight gags, secondary characters, original notion, and on and on. Hell, I'd date the groundhog. *Stripes* has its moments, too. And whole cult swears by *Caddyshack* (not me, but...). Then you've got a dispiriting collection of oopsy daisy it-don't-work flicks with less going for them and which Murray just couldn't carry, didn't care to steal: *Trouble with Bill*, *Rushmore*, *Kingpin*, *Scrooged*, *Man Who Knew too Little*. Oddly, Murray may be closest in Hollywood these days to W.C. Fields in this loveable reprobate, cuddly dirtbag he's ginned up, the one he reprises over and over despite a couple of gingerly ac-toor outings like *Razor's Edge* or *Mad Dog and Glory* (on good advice he turned down the role of the centurion Quintus Colitus in Mel Gibson's *Passion*). Soooooo... so, with a Bill Murray flick you risk big to win big: it'll bore you stiff or roll you in the aisle. How's it go with *Zissou*? Hint: Might wanna purchase a caffeinated beverage... like, a crew-served one.

Wes Anderson's last flick was *The Royal Tennenbaums*, where Owen Wilson polished his *ingénu* (not often masculine, but French for "clueless") and Huston her long-suffering wife, but with instead Gene Hackman tackling the loveable reprobate routine: brutal, selfish, arrogant, irresponsible father... real barrel of yucks. If you thought *Tennenbaums* was funny (and not just absurd, self-indulgent twiddery about how tough life is on smart people gasping for breath in that thin air way above where us dumbos can ever aspire to clamber), then you might go for *Zissou*. If not... *not*. Nevertheless, these guys had fleeting purchase on an idea, had it by the um, er... dorsal fin (to keep the fishy mood). It just wriggled—oopsy daisy—out of their grip and left us with that slimy ol' icky ol' fish stuff all over our fingers. Yeeeeee-uuuuw.

Goes like this. Steve Zissou (Murray in a salt-and-pepper beard with just enough of a pot to make you believe he used to could SCUBA) is a burnt out formerly brilliant (ain't we all) fish guy, Jacques Cousteau (variously pronounced) knockoff, who does deep sea dives and makes doubtful films (the kind you fall asleep in front of on *Discovery Channel*) about that weird new species of poisonous three-gilled fufflefish and undersea misadventures as his crew of vaguely sissy technicians in *speedos*—like, foreign dudes—tries half-heartedly to coax the thing in front of a camera: you can tell they're "foreign dudes" on account of they either have genuine (in which case totally incomprehensible) accents (some guy singing Brazilian folksongs) or do phony Hollywood (in which case wholly embarrassing) accents, like Willem Dafoe (Henry Kissinger by way of Sergeant Schultz *auf Kraut*). Kinda like the Elvis I do after two beers: "thingya vurah mush, thingya vurah mush..." Anyhow, Zissou, down on his luck (and his corporate finances), is most of all down on himself: he's lost his heart, what—since I guess he's supposed to be French though mercifully Murray doesn't do an accent—Steve might call his *élan vital* (French for "mojo") and now finds himself overshadowed by his *bête noire* (French for "mofo") and menaced by an actual *bête noire*, the dark "leopard shark" which ate or not his partner (Seymour Cassell, looking—do you ask me—so unappetizing even a shark oughta think twice... and by the way, that awful rug he wore in *Stuck on You* was evidently for real).

Steve, in a last flop of the dragon's tail, is gonna return to the scene of this trauma, find the shark, and kill it. "Revenge," he says simply... echoing Ahab's sworn swear in that book, *Whatzisname*. So now, into that simple premise, we introduce all the Hollywood foofoo and embellishments the big bucks are for (not the big bucks they pay those jerks who write this stuff but the big bucks *you're* gonna pay to be entertained by it, *those* big bucks). Steve has *no* bucks, big or other, and has to: wheedle it out of estranged but oddly (and odd) sympathetic wife Eleanor at no small cost in ego; hijack equipment from opulent (and corpulent) rival, Alistair (variously pronounced) Hennessey (a bulky Jeff Goldblum weighing in *with* about twenty words and *at* about twenty stone, embarrassment to blowfish everywhere); fend off the intrusive snooping of fee-male reportrix and high cheekbones, pouty lips but curiously (and unnecessarily) pregnant Jane Winslett-Richardson (Cate Blanchett... or else it's Kate Winslett playing Jane Blanchett-Richardson, not sure); reconcile himself with his long lost son or not Ned Plimpton (a sleepwalking Owen Wilson sporting a pencil 'stache and trying out a phony Kentucky accent or not about as authentic as Martin Sheen's Massa Robert in *Gettysburg*...); dodge Thai (I guess) pirates who board his vessel, the *Belafonte*—urf! urf! "calypso/Calypso," get it? Cousteau's ship? Harry's song? *Daaaaaaayo... daylight come and I wan' go home...?* Whap! Sorry I had to do that, but you had the look again!—and provoke Steve into a shooting foray in which he actually I think kills a guy (anybody ready for Bill Murray as action hero?); finesse a promise to Greenpeace or Amnesty Ichthyoidal or some outfit like that there not to kill the rare fish, maneater though it be, while nonetheless redeeming himself in the twilight of his career.

Now, that's a load for any guy to bear. Or any film. We gotta decide, though: gonna be *funny* or *serious*? Or gonna wibble wobble along that precarious tightrope between the two lugging one of those pole dinguses? Cost you eight bucks to find out ...well, twelve fifty if you count that industrial strength cola.