



Raiders!

Tuesday, October 20, 2015

Unless you are a fan, you probably would not want to sit next to me during a screening of Raiders of the Lost Ark – I mumble all the dialogue, I hum all the music, and I even



sometimes re-enact Indy's horsewhip flourishes, or haymaker punches. So, when the Steven Spielberg Film Society published a special tenth anniversary tribute to this film, one of my favorites, in newsletter #42, it was a given that I'd wax lyrical. You can hear me go bananas on the subject more recently at The Optical Podcast. Or buckle

your seat-belts to travel back to my 1991 reminiscence below:

Spielberg's Beard, Ten Years On

by Joe Fordham (May 1991)

In the early 1970s, Francis Coppola's advice to George Lucas – to grow a beard to give the young filmmaker credibility in the face of cigar chomping studio executives – became firmly established as a badge for the up-and-coming filmmaker. Steven Spielberg joined that club in 1980 when he laid his razor aside for the filming of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Ten years and seven movies later, Spielberg's beard has waxed and waned but he no longer has reason to be self-conscious of his status as a world-class filmmaker (case in point, Dustin Hoffman currently filming as Captain Hook in the latest Amblin production, if you can believe that).

Raiders was a breakthrough film for Spielberg in many ways. It reassured his place in filmdom – if that needed reassuring – and earned him the freedom to go on to make *E.T.* He was no longer the latest whiz kid. He had earned his stripes.



Spielberg and Lucas brought us a grand homage to serial action films. The film was an instant smash in the U.S., it had a slower start in Britain but quickly gained traction in the rest of Europe, and was notably hot in Paris where the French have always been receptive to the Howard Hawks/John Ford U.S. film dynamic. *Raiders* arrived unexpectedly, after the nervous mystery surrounding its production. The film's first re-release, a year later, cemented its popularity with a rejuvenated poster and (in Britain) 70mm experiments in provincial towns. The filmmakers had scored, revitalized a genre, and had once again won their audiences' hearts.

The six principals in the team responsible for the success were undoubtedly: (1) George Lucas for inspiration; (2) Harrison Ford for screen presence; (3) John Williams for music/heartbeat; (4) Douglas Slocombe for visual glamour; (5) Michael Kahn for pace and timing; and (6) Ben Burt for soul rumbling acoustics.



Thanks to Philip Kaufman relinquishing his post as the project's original director, *Raiders* came to Spielberg at a time when he was pondering the completion of his magnum opus *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and being first exposed to his first major critical backlash in response to *1941* ("Fools... bureaucratic fools"). Spielberg has been quoted as describing himself as the workman who pulled the team together, fired by his own vision, inspired by an amalgam of *Tailspin Tommy* and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

The result is a gritty, witty, luminous and pulsing film, with a relentless sense of fun and invention. The filmmakers only slip at one scene when they don't resolve the fate of Indy on the submarine, but even this may be viewed as in keeping with the style of the old Republic serials, who could eschew a logical escape at the final cliffhanger simply based on the virtue that their audience were kids and would forget the details of their hero's predicament by next Saturday's installment.

This aside, *Raiders* never talks down to its audience. Lucas and screenwriter Lawrence

Kasdan weave the thread of Indy as skeptic, constantly throwing him up against the mystery of the ancient supernatural. Spielberg meanwhile clips the action playfully along in this, the sunniest and most energetic of the Indy films, with the best female lead (Karen Allen) – an always difficult quotient in the 'boys only' world of the action movie.



Humor cuts through all the usual boundaries and lifts the action – often gory, always tough – to exhilarating highs beyond the standard red-meat Chuck Norris Cannon fodder. Characters poke fun at each other with a world-weary self-awareness, without ever reverting to the wink-at-the-camera camp school of 'genre' filmmaking. There is a reality about the movie, frequently studded with chilling moments of great cinematic poetry and power: Indy's eye framed in the shadows of the Raven saloon, repeated later in the astrologer's house in Cairo... or the 'bad dates' scene with a dead monkey seen through the rotating fan – music... or Indy on the mountain top at the Tanis dig framed against the sun, he adjusts his hat, Sallah's men all chant... these are the lyrical touches of cinematic sensibility in its prime.

Raiders, of course, has spawned many imitators, aside from its own sequels. The Yoram/Globus *Allan Quatermain* films, the *Tales of the Gold Monkey* TV series with Stephen Collins, *Romancing the Stone* and *Jewel of the Nile* are just a few of the obvious 'inspired by' cash-ins. Whether you view these by-products as flattery, or an inevitable

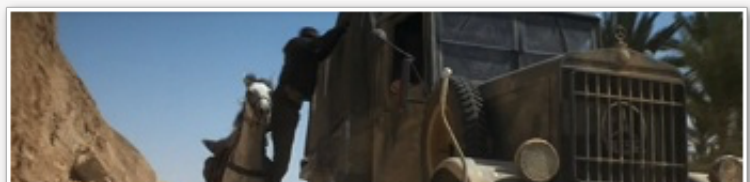
blight, the most revealing spin-off probably has been Lucasfilm's own 'making of' film.



Commissioned by George Lucas and produced in tandem with all stages of production, from conceptual meetings to final cut, the 'Making of *Raiders*' that most fans have seen is only a fragment of

the full film, a unique and extraordinary 'how to' guide covering production of a big budget studio film, for the film school instruction – an inspired gift to future filmmakers.

Raiders may have been a job of work for Spielberg, and pure unadulterated screen entertainment for the majority of its fans, but it is too easy to allow these factors to pigeonhole this movie as filmic frippery, which it is not. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has a lot to offer, in addition to its place as the cinematic referent of the 1980s. For the film buff and the filmmaker, *Raiders* remains today as re-watchable on laserdisc as in its first run in the theatres. It is a film for its time, but it's a timeless kind of film, one that is viewed with affection by audiences worldwide.



The communal experience is positive and up-lifting. A private viewing is revealing and diverting. It's a very clever movie, but not too smart for its own good. A real refreshing dose of 'what it's all about,' and still a prime time occasion on TV, ten years old, chopped to pieces as a panned and scanned, commercial littered rerun.



So, until the widescreen letterboxed, super stereo laserdisc appears... "Life goes on, Indy"... "Adios, Sapito"... "This is it, this is where Forrestal cashed in"... (but most importantly) "Stay out of the light."

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