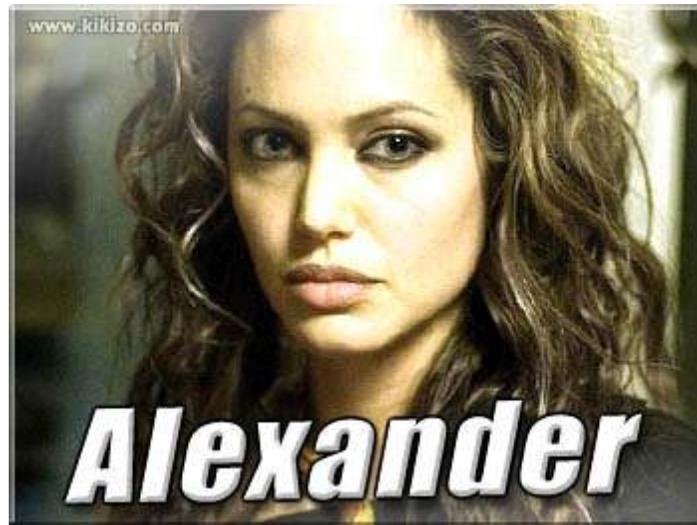


Originally Published on Kikizo.com - February 7, 2005

Attempting to produce a biopic of the greatest conqueror in antiquity might be termed hubris. An accusation *Alexander's* director and co-writer Oliver Stone is no stranger to. Yet Stone has proved time and time again, with superbly executed factually based movies like *The Doors*, *JFK* and *Nixon*, that he is more than up to the task of condensing a complex series of events into a beautifully shot, coherent and captivating film. Sadly, with *Alexander* he has failed on all three counts.



Alexander is a confused and disjointed paint-by-numbers Hollywood epic, which doesn't fail through lack of ambition, but rather the absence of focus and a decent script. Stone has borrowed freely from movies like *Caligula*, *Troy*, and most especially *Gladiator*, particularly in the unintentionally amusing mysticism and blurovision battle sequence departments. The result is an overlong, incoherent and immature film, which embarrasses more than it captivates.



Performances throughout are extremely mixed, which to is to an extent understandable, as in a movie of this size and stuttering chronology (more of which later), producing a

focused performance can't have be easy. Val Kilmer shines, continuing a return to form he demonstrated in 2003's *Wonderland*, and is on screen much to briefly, stealing his scenes as Alexander's ogreish and troubled bacchanalian father, King Philip. Colin Farrell, the current wonderkid of Hollywood, gives a mixed performance in the title role. His contrast of the fey and maternally dominated Alexander of youth, with the tortured and unbalanced Alexander of later life is as mature and expert a performance as Farrell has given to date. However, when portraying Alexander's love for his childhood companion Hephaistion (Jared Leto), or the overwhelming vision and ambition that made Alexander great, he's much less convincing; vacillating between hammy over sincerity and dry staginess.



Angelina Jolie provides a performance which is, by her usual standards, reasonably muted. Personally I've never found her convincing as a seductress, she's always much too conscious of the camera, far too visibly acting, to portray a convincing succubus and this role is no exception. Jared Leto as Hephaistion, is given a perhaps impossible task, to portray a character the film's writers (Stone, Christopher Kyle, and Laeta Kalogridis) drew with broad strokes indeed, and seem to have been afraid to develop. Whilst Hephaistion is on screen in many of the film's numerous and disjointed vignettes, his lines are extremely limited and inexpressive, and we never gain any meaningful insight into his character. Leaving one of the film's keys scenes, his underplayed death, to fall flat and pass without stirring an emotion.



Supporting performances vary - Anthony Hopkins as the narrator Ptolemy is sincere but dull, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, playing Alexander's general Cassander, is as always horrific - but frustratingly as with the central characters, none are given enough substance to shine. Thus Alexander occasionally resembles the pilot of a glam miniseries, in which numerous characters are introduced, so test audiences can determine which they detest least, and which get to step into empty lift shafts.



Effects wise, there's nothing audiences haven't seen before. Babylon and Ptolemy's Egypt are decorative, but never gasp-inducingly so. Battle scenes are much as you'd expect; long, bloody, confusing, and very occasionally beautiful. The battles depicted are indeed epic, but they're dwarfed by the hordes thrown together in recent movies (notably the Lord of the Rings trilogy). Overall the films cinematography is below par, with two elements in particular - the stagy sets of the Macedonia of Alexander's youth, and the stuttering post production effects Stone tosses willy-nilly into the movies later battles - drawing groans.



Rumor has it that the release of Alexander was held back for months, while Warner Brothers demanded Stone cut down on the graphic homosexual content, fearing a conservative backlash. Stone's 'moral majority' critics needn't have worried. Whilst the theme of love between men - whether paternal, fraternal or sexual, suffuses the movie; a seamy undercurrent of homophobia runs beneath. Much is made of Alexander's love for

his childhood companion Hephaestion (Jared Leto), but whilst stares of longing and oaths of fealty pass between them, nary a kiss is screened. By contrast, it's only when Alexander, in classic tragic hero fashion, begins his paranoia fueled fall from greatness that Stone begins to portray him as actively gay, bedding the eunuch Bagoas (Francisco Bosch) in a role so poorly developed it lacks a single line.



Just as worrisome, is Stone's treatment of the seduction of Alexander's native bride Roxane (Rosario Dawson - 25th Hour, Kids). In a scene reminiscent of the struggle, followed by willing submission, that epitomized Hollywood's depiction of feminine sexuality up till the mid 70's (from Gone with the Wind to Straw Dogs), Farrell grapples with his bride before she ultimately succumbs to his sweaty machismo.



If you're seeking the factual accuracy one might have expected from Stone, you'll have to look elsewhere, as all too often history is sacrificed in order to dramatise and simplify. This might be forgivable if what had resulted was an emotive and thrilling film. One which didn't take itself too seriously! Unfortunately Alexander is a ponderously overblown and confusing story, which sacrifices linearity for no apparent end, and revolves around a narrator, Ptolemy, who distracts even more from the poorly structured plot - so obviously existing to explain the bits Stone left out, that his character might have been entitled 'Expositus'.



The film skips from Alexander's untested youth to his final battle against the Persian Army, with only a cheesy interlude from our narrator by way of explanation. We aren't shown Alexander's initial challenges in battle, and are never convinced of his legendary tactical genius. In an apparent effort to make a more sympathetic and flawed character, Stone has avoided engaging with the outstanding mind of Alexander. Although the man's self-destructive ambition is displayed throughout, we're never given a real understanding of the scholarship and aspirations which lay behind it.



Stone has taken the bizarre decision to include a medley of European, American and Irish brogues. Perhaps this was meant to emphasize the emotional gap between Alexander's brutal father (Kilmer makes a brave but ultimately misguided attempt at a cod Irish accent) and his Dionysian mother (Jolie delivers her lines in hiss somewhere between Italian and Romany). Perhaps it's an analogy of historical reality - as Alexander's army would have included men from a host of Greek city states. Whatever Stone's intention, the result is a mess of ultimately distracting and occasionally comic accents, making a shoddy movie seem even less professional.



Alexander is a film that seems willfully unsure of its direction, much like its central character. The film flirts with homosexuality, without actively attempting to understand its formative impact, or the conflict between Alexander's apparent desires and his empire's need for an heir. It trivializes and fails to flesh out its few female characters who are mere cyphers for a self indulgent and unconvincing conqueror, a man who seems more driven by the rushing pace of a potted history, than the active determinant of a worlds destiny.

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The Final Word: Alexander ultimately lacks all conviction, and screens more like a first draft than a well paced and structured film, whilst abandoning any pretensions to historical accuracy, which might have explained (but never forgiven) its ponderous and scatological approach. Appropriately enough the film was released in the US to coincide with thanksgiving. A true turkey! In a word - avoid.