

Leafy Sea Dragons In Your Face

The new IMAX film Under the Sea 3D opens up a panoply of undersea wonders few are privy to.

Posted: February 20, 2009

It is that time of year again — award season in Hollywood. Let the chest thumping, back patting and politicizing begin. Naturally, I thought it would be a nice time for a movie review. And not He's Just Not That Into You, because I'm just not that into "chick flicks." No, I thought I'd review the new IMAX film Under the Sea 3D, which I was fortunate to recently view at a special press screening with other FAMA and Aquarium Fish International editors. As an added bonus, I was able to take my 11-year-old daughter, Cheyanne, to the movie as well. Who says work isn't fun? This G-rated family fare, cuttlefish love scenes notwithstanding, opened nationwide in IMAX theaters on February 13. Anyhow, in the spirit of award season, I thought I'd do my movie review in an unconventional, award-show kind of way.

And the Oscar Goes to ...

Best Costume Design goes to the leafy and weedy sea dragons. Regardless of how many times you may have seen these garishly clad undersea oddities at your local public aquarium, they never fail to disappoint. Now imagine them on the big screen in not one, not two, but three dimensions. The IMAX technology is so superb that you seem to be in the drink with them. "Audiences will not be cold and wet, but what they'll see when they look through those goggles is exactly what we saw through the dive mask," exclaimed the filmmaker Howard Hall. Indeed it is as close as one can get to scuba diving without getting wet.

Best Makeup goes to the blue spotted stingray that with a couple of thumps of its huge bat wings disguised itself as a bit of the sea floor.

Best Character goes to the reef stonefish. The film's director, Howard Hall, spent a record-setting six hours underwater on one dive in order to capture footage of the stonefish. These perfectly camouflaged sit-and-wait predators look like inanimate chunks of rubble. When a potential meal strays too close to one, it displays a cavernous yawn, engulfs its prey and closes with lightning quickness.

Best Actor in a Life-Supporting Role (awarded posthumously) goes the intricate-looking jellyfish (*Thysanostoma thysamura*) that poured its guts into this once-in-a-lifetime role of becoming snack food for a hungry green sea turtle. A consummate performer, the jellyfish didn't flinch one bit as the turtle removed big bites from it. You probably wouldn't flinch either if you had the consistency of something poured out of a Jell-O mold. Green sea turtles are immune to jellyfish stings and find the alienlike creatures yummy.

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Pictured are some of the Freshwater And Marine Aquarium (FAMA) and Aquarium Fish International (AFI) editors at a recent press showing of IMAX Under the Sea 3D. From left: FAMA Editor Clay Jackson with his 11-year-old daughter Cheyanne (editor in training), Group Editor Russ Case, FAMA Senior Associate Editor Ethan Mizer and AFI Assistant Editor Cassandra Radcliff.

A leafy sea dragon gets the star treatment in the waters of South Australia during the filming of Under the Sea 3D.

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Jim Carrey smiles for a snapshot during the narration of the IMAX Under the Sea 3D. © 2009 Eric Charbonneau/Courtesy Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

A green sea turtle makes a meal out of a jellyfish (*Thysanostoma thysamura*) in the Great Barrier Reef of Australia.

© 2008 Jeff Wildermuth/Courtesy Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. Best Undersea Actress in a Leading Role goes to the female flamboyant cuttlefish. This starlet of the seven seas made the most of her on-screen time, even though two pushy male co-stars tried to hone in on her scenes.

Best Interpretive Dance goes to the underwater "field" of 6-foot garden eels. This particular moment of Under the Sea 3D was most fascinating to watch. One moment the eels are mostly out of their burrows, but still tethered by their tails and gyrating to the current, and then just like that — they disappear in unison down their hidey-holes. This from Howard Hall's production journal: "I could see eels in the hazy distance that were taller than me, by at least a foot! This enormous field of eels surrounded us as far as we could see in any direction."

Best Set Design goes to Mother Nature and the five remote, still-quite-pristine underwater locales, where Under the Sea

3D was filmed over 110 days at sea and 350 hours underwater. These were Indonesia, Papua New Guinea's New Britain Island and Milne Bay, the Great Barrier Reef and South Australia. Each area lent its own special element to the film, and the shots were seamlessly woven together into one 40-minute production. Much of the film was shot on location in the famed "Coral Triangle," located in the Indo-Pacific area of Indonesia, New Guinea and Australia. This area holds 75 percent of the known coral species and some 3,000 species of reef fishes.

Best Narration goes to film star Jim Carrey. Carrey's smooth-as-butter delivery informs but never steps on the performances of the on-screen talent.

Best Director goes to Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Howard Hall, who was the first person to take an IMAX 3D camera underwater for the filming of the 1994 documentary *Into the Deep*. "Our main goal in making these films is to bring animals that are little known, or not known at all, to the screen, to let people see how strange and wonderful they are," said Hall. He added, "People need a reason to care about coral reefs."

Best Moral of the Story goes to global warming and its possible future affects on many of the creatures profiled in *Under the Sea 3D*. Among those who believe there's a link between increased CO2 emissions, ocean acidification and the eventual failure of sea creatures like cuttlefish being able to make new shells are the filmmakers of *Under the Sea 3D*.

Best Cinematography goes to the 1,300-pound IMAX camera. (Wonder what kind of deposit you'd have to put down on something like that?) The film's director (also director of photography) Howard Hall and film editor Toni Myers are expected to accept. The camera could not be reached for comment. "The image quality is so precise, it's virtually identical to what we experienced when we were down in the water — the same colors, the same texture, the same proximity. It makes you feel like you could reach out and touch these animals," said Hall. Ever the team player, the camera bravely stood between divers and several great whites. The camera provided solace to an uncaged Hall and cameraman Peter Kragh. "The shark would have to eat 1,300 pounds of aluminum before he ever got to us," said Hall.

Cheyenne's Movie Review

"I thought it would be scary, but it wasn't. I liked the dragons [leafy and weedy sea dragons]; they were cute. I thought the narrator [Jim Carrey] was expressive, and it was fun trying to pop the bubbles at the end."

My Wrap-Up

What I enjoyed the most about *Under the Sea 3D* was its hopeful tone. The film didn't belabor the whole greenhouse-gases thing and worst-case scenario it into the whole "all-corals-will-be-dead-in-50-years" thing. One more of those lectures and methinks I might run around in circles, flail my arms and scream incoherent babblings until they come and take me away. And rather than show the ticket-buying public some played-out reef located on Overdeveloped Cay, they instead took viewers to five places that still look, in 2009, to be in remarkably good shape.

And just between you and me, I tried to pop the bubbles coming at me as the closing credits rolled, too. Do yourself and your kids (if you have any) a favor, and check out this delightful oceanic romp. Spend your money on a quality film with a good message about the ocean rather than on another "schlock" film.

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