Pirates of the Caribbean II absolutely raked it in at the box office this past weekend. One of those paying customers was Swerbs Blurbs entertainment correspondent Mitch Cyrus, whose movie reviews have been a staple on this website since its inception. What did Mitch think of Pirates? What you find may surprise you.

At long last we have a bona fide Summer Blockbuster Hit. “Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest” has smashed all kinds of records, taking in $132 million over the weekend. But I’m not sure if it is because it’s such a good movie, or because all of the other so-called blockbusters have been so underwhelming that the American public was overjoyed to find anything to entertain them in a pure “popcorn movie” fashion.

My feeling is that it is that latter, as this episode of “Pirates” is quite entertaining, but far from a classic. If you want dazzling special effects, swashbuckling action sequences and edge-of-your-seat suspense, then this is one of the better ways to spend two and a half hours. If you want great script writing, decent character development, and a satisfactory ending, keep looking, as director Gore Verbinski is much more interested in creating his own little Indiana Jones level action flick combined with an “Empire Strikes Back” level cliffhanger ending to pay attention to trifling details like coherent scripts.

Fortunately, Johnny Depp is still well in control of one of cinema's greatest characters, Captain Jack Sparrow. The good captain may not be quite as stoned as he seemed in the first film, but he is still a confusing mix of Keith Richards, Errol Flynn, and Humphrey Bogart, a man whose Ying is always at odds with his Yang when it comes to motives and morality. Most often, the immoral side wins out, but one can never be sure. Depp's genius with the role is in knowing that the audience wants Capt. Jack to be the good guy, and then surprising them with the character's basic selfishness before coming through in the clutch as a hero.

In this film, he has even more reason to be treacherous, as it's not his precious ship that is in danger, but his very soul. Thirteen years earlier Jack made a deal with Davy Jones himself (Bill Nighly's unmistakable voice coming from a creature with an octopus head and a crab's claw instead of a left hand). Jack was given The Black Pearl and its captainship for said thirteen years, but afterwards Jack must submit to being on the crew of The Flying Dutchman for 100 years. Of course, Jack schemes to avoid paying his part of the bargain, even going so far as to holing up on a tropical island to avoid being at sea. He also tries to barter his way out by trying to shanghai one hundred unsuspecting souls to trade for his own. Stifled in his attempts, he must resort to finding the hidden Dead Man's Chest, and unlock its secret to defeat Davy Jones.

In the meantime, the other members of the POTC triumvirate; Will Turner and Elizabeth Swan, have problems of their own on the day of their planned wedding. Business trumps government as Cutler Becket, a shady representative of the East India Trading Company, has procured an arrest warrant and execution orders for the young couple for their earlier assistance to Captain Jack. This is just an excuse to force Will to track down Jack and obtain the non working compass Jack carries with him and the treasure he thinks it will bring him. Elizabeth's father, the governor of Port Royal, arranges her escape to England, but treachery foils his plan. However, Elizabeth manages to make some plans of her own, and soon she is also hot on the trail of the other two heroes.

From there, it becomes a movie not unlike the Indiana Jones features, with the action being non-stop and the circumstances more and more outrageous. In fact, the first major action set piece is homage to the original “Raiders of the Lost Ark”. Set in the jungle, we have native savages chasing Jack and his crew as they attempt to out run them in getting to their boat, just like Indiana dodged the arrows, spears, and blow darts getting on his plane. And instead of the large rock rolling around, Will and the crew are in a round cage of nearly the same size tumbling out of control.

But the main villains in this episode are Davy Jones and his crew. And while they are not nearly as scary as the undead moonlit skeletons from “Curse of the Black Pearl”, they are just as blood thirsty. Make no mistake; this movie’s PG-13 rating is well earned, as there are enough extras killed in this film to almost qualify as a Schwarzenegger flick, so think hard before bringing any child younger than seven.

The special effects are spectacular, far beyond what was seen in the first film. The acting, by and large, is also superior. Orlando Bloom no longer seems content with getting by on his good looks, and Will Turner is a much stronger character than last time. Keira Knightley has lost none of her wit and spunk, but also now shows a quiet desperation that results her making morally difficult decisions, and doing so in a quite believable manner. Jack Davenport gets to stretch his acting wings much more in this film as Commodore Norrington. Stripped of his rank and his privilege, Norrington has become a drunken shell of himself bent on revenge, and Davenport obviously relishes in playing something other than a strait-laced foil to Jack and Will. Stellan Skarsgard is another new character, although we’ve heard of him mentioned throughout the first movie. Skarsgard adds great dignity and sorrow to the role of Bootstrap Bill Turner, Will’s father, and a slave on Jones’ ship.

The second part of a trilogy is almost always the least regarded of them. Even if they are done well, as were “The Empire Strikes Back” and “Lord of the Rings:

The Two Towers", they are still inherently disappointing as you know you have to wait a year or more for the conclusion. This is not to put "Dead Man's Chest" in that elite category, as the plot holes/deficiencies preclude that honor. But given the problems and disappointments seen throughout the Summer of 2006 with all the high dollar sputters of X-Men, DaVinci, Superman, and Ethan Hawk, "Pirates" is still a fun ride, and well worth a trip to your local multiplex.

My Rating: Incomplete. The final movie of the trilogy will determine where this film ultimately stands. But I do recommend it. If the final movie is the same or worse; I'd probably give this one 2 ½ footballs. If the last one is great; I might be tempted to give this one a 3 ½, assuming it builds on this one, and isn't a "Three Years Later" type of jump. We'll find out next summer.