Within twenty minutes of walking out of the theater, I had two different people ask me my opinion of the latest Ridley Scott/Russell Crowe collaboration; “Robin Hood”. My response?

“It didn’t suck”.

I said that each time without really thinking that much about what that meant, but I kept coming back to the phrase over the next few days. What did I really mean by that? I think it does imply disappointment; as in, there was too much talent involved in this project to not end up being better than it was. But I think it also implies that while the movie wasn’t what I was hoping it would be, it was still worth watching.

More than likely, it’s something that I’ll continue to debate with myself for a long time, and it will require at least one more viewing before I deliver my “final verdict”.

So with that in mind, let’s talk about the movie (as well as compare it to others in its category).

It is a very risky proposition to tackle iconic characters. Especially those that have been around for hundreds of years. Guy Ritchie found that out last winter with some of the barbs he took for his version of Sherlock Holmes (although I do find it interesting that the true Sir Arthur Conan Doyle literary fanatics said that Ritchie's interpretation of Holmes was much closer to Doyle's than anything else on film over the past thirty years).

In line with that would be the treatment over the years on film of the legend of King Arthur. There have been so many interpretations over the years, each obviously with their own take…but for the most part, they follow the ancient script known by almost everyone…sometimes making an absolute classic, in the case of John Boorman's exquisite "Excalibur".

The risk though is when someone goes off the reservation, and changes the "facts" that have been presented over the centuries. The absolute worst was 1995's "First Knight", an atrociously bad film with Sean Connery as the King, Julia Ormond as Guinevere, and Richard Gere (of all people) as Lancelot. No Merlin…and no Morgana or Mordred as enemies, instead it's Ben Cross as the evil Prince Malagant (what a horrible name). Oh, yeah…and Arthur is really old, and when he dies, Lancelot is still alive and Arthur leaves the kingdom and his wife to him.

WTH? I still can't even type a summary of that film without raising my blood pressure, I hated it so much.

The other tact to take with a legend is to try to make it more "historically correct". In other words, try to give what you think is a historical depiction of the "real" events that ended up providing the foundation to the literary legends. Wolfgang Petersen attempted this in 2004 with "Troy", with very mixed results. I personally liked the idea of looking at the Trojan War as real soldiers fighting, without the supernatural meddling of the Greek gods, but it was bogged down by Brad Pitt's worst acting job ever, and the over-the-top theatrics of Brian Cox as Agamemnon and Brendan Gleeson as Menelaus.

Back to the Camelot legend, there was Antoine Fuqua's "King Arthur", which ironically also was released in 2004. In this one, the Arthur legend was "historically explained" by making the future king a Roman Captain at the end of the Roman occupation of Britain (around 400 AD). He chooses to stay, along with some of his knights, and defends the island from Norman invaders, assisted by a Celtic warrior princes, named Guinevere. In this version, Merlin is basically a Celtic Druid shaman.

That movie was very uneven, but I actually liked how they did it, and watching it again a few months ago, I appreciated a lot more the second time around.

So after pontificating about OTHER movies for almost a full page, let's get back to this one.

Ridley Scott is attempting very much to do to the legend of Robin Hood what Fuqua did with King Arthur; show the man in historical context and set up HOW the legend could have came about.

To do so, he starts with the Crusades, and shows an older, fatter, less virtuous King Richard the Lionheart who is almost out of money and out of support from his troops and his kingdom, sacking a few more French castles to loot enough money to get back home. During these early scenes, Richard meets up with one of his top archers, Robin Longstride (Crowe), whom he questions about "the truth" regarding the peoples' perception of the king. Robin's honest answer gets some respect from the king…but not enough to avoid getting himself and three of his friends put in stocks for his pertinence.

Circumstances then come about that change everything. The King is killed in battle, and the guard taking his crown back to England is ambushed by the traitorous Sir Godfrey (played to malicious perfection by Mark Strong, who was also the bad guy in "Sherlock Holmes"). To get back home, Robin, Little John, Will Scarlett, and Allan A'Dayle (who?) impersonate knights to get on the first boat back home.

All this leads to Robin ending up in Nottingham, and meeting up with Marion.

And here is where I'm at the point where it's hard to talk more about the plot, because it runs off in twenty different directions, and this is what causes the movie to bog down so much.

First of all; there are just too many villains. The obvious one is Sir Godfrey, but then you have the smarmy Prince/King John, and he is just as much of a foppish imbecile as he's been

portrayed in any other Robin Hood movie. Except that a couple of times in the movie, he must actually fight alongside of Robin. You also have a few scenes with the infamous Sheriff of Nottingham (a pudged up Matthew Macfadyen, almost unrecognizable), and a few more with the treacherous King of France thrown in. To say nothing of the fact that Richard the Lionheart isn't exactly on the Side of Good himself.

Who could blame Robin if he had just said "screw this" and caught the first boat to Ireland?

What works, however, are strong performances from Crowe and Cate Blanchett as Marion (not Maid Marian, as often depicted). I applaud Ridley Scott's bold decision to replace the lightweight pretty-girl Sienna Miller in the role of Marion with Blanchett, making no attempt to either hide or apologize for her age. Their chemistry is excellent, and also blends well with the venerable Max Von Sydow as Marion's father-in-law, with any scene involving two or more of them rising well above the limitations of the script.

There are also fine acting turns from Mark Addy as a perfect Friar Tuck, Kevin Durand as a bloodthirsty Little John, and William Hurt as William Marshall, an old counselor to Richard who suspects that King John is up to no good.

About ninety minutes into the film, I found myself continually checking my watch to see if it was over yet…but I didn't repeat that act for the last forty minutes of the film, which are chock-full of great scenes…even if Scott borrowed heavily from "Braveheart" in creating them. They were as rousing as anything Scott put together for "Gladiator", and saved the movie, as far as I'm concerned.

What also saves the movie from ridicule, in my line of thinking, is in looking back and seeing that Scott was at least honest to the material…as much as one can be when looking at a story that has several versions through the years.

I like that Scott chose to make Robin a commoner…as that is what the original 15th century version showed the man to be. Later, in the 16th and 17th

centuries, the tales changed to make him a displaced aristocrat, which is the version that Hollywood has usually followed (and don't get me started on Kevin Costner in "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves"). I think this interpretation works better, and is more historically accurate.

For the rest, Scott does make this pretty much a "prequel", as in Robin doesn't head to Sherwood Forest to rob from the rich and give to the poor until the very end of the movie. In doing this, Scott has made sure that he has not "invalidated" any of the future adventures of Robin and his Merry Men, and I respect that decision. One could say that he was setting it up for a sequel, but I don't believe that in the slightest.

What we end up with is a decent enough movie that didn't inspire me to throw English Literature books at the screen in disgust. I truly enjoyed many parts of it, but those bits weren't enough to make me forget how badly the script needed clarification, and how much better it would have been with about 25 minutes edited out of it.

So, as I said at the top…it didn't suck.

My Rating: Bill Nelsen (2 ½ footballs).

(One last historical note: Everyone should realize that as much as Prince John is ALWAYS vilified in these movies, he is still the historical King John who signed the Magna Carta in 1215. That doesn't make John a good person, as that charter was forced upon him by barons who were about to wage civil war if he didn't do it. He regretted signing it, and later rejected it; causing a brief civil war that lasted until his death in 1216. Ridley Scott makes reference to all of these facts in his film, implying that the Charter was first presented to John in 1201).