

Tom, Thanks for Cast Away

October 3, 2019

CAST AWAY (2000)

Directed by Robert Zemeckis

Written by William Broyles Jr.

Starring Tom Hanks as Chuck Noland

Alone time is a precious commodity. It doesn't matter if you're a text-book socially-fuelled extrovert with an appetite for human connection and the phrase "people person" on your resume; you still crave your alone time, your low-power mode, your zero performance state, whether or not you care to admit it. There are fundamental pieces of you that can't be self-identified until you're out of company, and forced to sit still in their surrounding echoes. That's not to say it's comfortable for anybody. I'm someone who claims to enjoy his alone time, but am I really alone if I'm checking emails and social notifications, or tweeting out, or even making art? Am I really alone if I need to queue up my podcasts before getting in the shower, so if one finishes, the next will begin, and I won't be forced to endure the white noise of running water?

True solitude is tense. It's why we tether ourselves to endless distractions; and as these distractions grow more numerous, more ubiquitous, the situations in which we find ourselves forced into true solitude are quickly drifting off to sea, leaving us alone on a crumbling raft of self-contentment, without a clue or a hope. Cast Away's pager-addicted Chuck Noland, had learned about coping with forced solitude, but it didn't hurt any less to see his lifeless companion pass him by, as had life itself.

With that said, the sad nature of this movie can't be blamed on Wilson. I know I've referenced him twice in this blog, but I only do that because it's the most obvious bit of genius in TH's performance. "Only Tom Hanks could make us cry over a volleyball." Sure, when you phrase it like that, it's a powerful accomplishment, but don't sell short your human contribution of achieving feelings. You're not sad for Wilson, or even for Chuck; you're sad for *you*. You're sad because you have to face the fact that, given time, the things you've willingly poured your love into, will leave you, shattered and unredeemed. It's worth noting, up to this point in the film, you've been served very little Movie Making - which is to say, after the establishing of a romance and an expensive disaster sequence, you spent an hour+ watching a man on a beach, dancing around a fire and nursing his wounds. There was a deliberate absence of wide-shots and special effects. You went from hearing like four consecutive Elvis songs in the civilized world, to an island that's not even musically scored. This helped you to feel as isolated as Chuck, and it made you all the more emotional when those elements returned.

And watching this film for the first time in (guessing) fifteen years, oh, was I emotional. I find I'm reacting to things more strongly as I get older anyway, and Cast Away marks the third instalment in this year's self-imposed audit of water-based disaster movies (the first two were Jaws and Titanic, and I need a long break). This one in particular hits me in a soft spot because it's so empirically concerned with the passage of time. It might be my biggest take-away that, in Cast Away, Robert Zemeckis has made a film that's even more about time than Back to the Future. And it's Zemeckiciously overt: Chuck Noland is an efficiency specialist for FedEx, who's big Cool Guy move is to ship himself digital timers as a way of knowing how speedy a delivery is, down to the second. His most cherished personal affect is the family pocket-watch given to him by his beloved Kelly (Helen Hunt), which stops ticking when Chuck's plane crashes and leaves him alone on a remote island, frozen in time. Meanwhile, life ticks on for Kelly and everyone else. In the truest sense, it's Time that abandons Chuck; the thing he willingly poured his love into, literally casts him away.

Let's be clear: this is not a cynical movie. There are too many Elvis songs, baggy Christmas sweaters, and Tom Hankses for it to be a cynical movie. Chuck is driven by hope. The hero's final monologue about a person's need to carry on is not an ode to Kelly. If anything, it's an acceptance that she had no choice but to carry on without him. Chuck didn't persist through 1500 days of forced solitude just to have his heart irreparably broken on the other side. He had to carry on for himself, because that's just what we do. And when we're really abandoned by life, we go out and buy a new Wilson with our own damned money.

In the final minutes of *Cast Away*, Chuck finally sets out to deliver the FedEx package that had been en route with him when the plane went down. Before leaning it up against a stranger's door, he attaches a note that reads, "This package saved my life, thank you." He then heads off for a Zemeckiciously literal fork in the road, without ever learning what the package contained. It didn't matter. His job was to deliver it, as quickly as humanly possible, and he did. You can't stop life's obstacles from getting in the way. Lest we engage in that awful ritual where a movie's premise is litigated through the lens of today, guess what? Amazon Prime ain't immune to plane crashes either.

It's possible the lingering awareness of one's alone-time-deficiency is rooted in a fear of running out of time altogether. We so rarely feel nourished by our alone time because, even when we're by ourselves, we don't allow ourselves to be truly alone. We go on feeling unresolved of our inability to deliver things punctually or live happily ever after because time keeps on ticking. That's what I took away from *Cast Away*: it's not just about being alone, or time, or alone time. It's about how life goes on. And however tense, or heartbreaking, ask yourself, *isn't it better that life goes on?*

Thx!