

Captain Phillips

A couple of times a year, Hollywood produces movies that, though made independently, uncannily echo each other (like the two smash-up-the-White House thrillers that came out this spring, "Olympus Has Fallen," and "White House Down"). This month brings not only the Robert Redford starring vehicle "All Is Lost" but another story of peril and survival on the Indian Ocean: "Captain Phillips," based on a true 2009 incident involving the takeover of the American-owned Maersk Alabama container ship by a group of Somali pirates.

After a gentle Vermont introduction to ship captain Rich Phillips (Tom Hanks), we see him in port in Oman, readying his ship for a run to Mombasa, Kenya. While out in high seas, however, his craft is trailed then boarded by four Somali pirates in a speeding skiff. The Somalis, threatening but skittish, are led by the gaunt Muse (Barkhoud Abdi) who can communicate in broken English that he wants a ransom. The bulk of the crew, aware of the invasion, hides below decks and even overpowers Muse, but things turn complicated when the four pirates trick the captain into the ship's ironclad lifeboat and are jettisoned into the sea. They figure they can extort even more money from the company by having Phillips as a hostage.

Thus ensues a massive US military manhunt, led by the destroyer USS Bainbridge, to save the captain, by now subdued and surrounded in the stifling lifeboat with his edgy captors. This set-up continues the knuckle-biting rhythm for the rest of the movie (filmed in and around Malta).

The film's casting is key. Hanks here, a measured and detail-oriented skipper, wonderfully transforms himself into a reluctant hero, a decent man scrambling to protect his cargo and crew, testing a quartet of men who could hardly be more different from him. Given an adversary so unsettling, most viewers are likely to wholly identify with the sympathetic Hanks. He is a stand-in for Everyman, much as Redford is in "All Is Lost" and with almost as many stunt moves. He also pulls off a wonderful quiet coda to his otherwise energetic performance. After his rescue, Hanks, being examined by a patient Navy doctor, confronts the trauma he has undergone. The scene is surpassingly moving.

The Somali actors, all recruited from refugee families who live in the Minneapolis area, are likewise compelling. Though they could be seen as types, the men still show some dimension, one harsher and more fanatic, one more immature and scared, and, in the case of Muse, the enigmatic demeanor of a man in over his head while trying to keep it. Near the end, his fate likely sealed, he can only intone: "I come too far; I can't give up," when asked by Phillips why he persists. None of these performers had acted in movies before but here they prove themselves.

The knuckle-biting tempo and documentary-like realism achieved in "Captain Phillips" are the specialties of its director, Paul Greengrass, an Englishman who helmed two of the "Bourne" action films as well as the thrilling "United 93." He is a master of the frenetic, hand-held camera, here used mostly to splendid effect, especially in the tight quarters of the lifeboat scenes, but he also commands in stiller scenes where the camera may be calm but the tension never flags. With this motion picture, he may have

created his masterpiece.
(*The film is rated PG-13 and runs 134 min.*)

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