

CAMS

Phil Hoad

Tights! Camera! Action! *Pirates Of The Caribbean* sees the swashbuckler movie scale the battlements once more. (Adapted)

Some things in life are expressly designed to make people happy. Bubble wrap, BLT sandwiches and the incarceration of Jeffrey Archer, to name three. But if a permanent cure for depression really exists, it's surely has to be the sight of a grown man with a needle-point rapier (sword) and an equally sharp moustache, leaping around, swinging on chandeliers with Devil-May-Care Abandon, possibly using the word "varlet" and generally locked in mortal swordplay with an arch nemesis matching him quip for quip. And always with a smile: **swashbuckling** is for making people happy.

Not convinced? Go and watch *Pirates Of The Caribbean: The Curse Of The Black Pearl*, currently fighting off the heinous box office fall-off that has hit most of this year's blockbusters, and inveigling itself into the hearts of the American public. Eluding the curse of the black script that has blighted recent pirate enterprises like Hook and Cutthroat Island, Johnny Depp's Captain Jack Sparrow lifts the film above being just a glorified, join the dots Jolly Roger colouring book. Shambling, slurring and lolling around fellow buccaneers and starchy English naval types alike, he's the only one who understands the real spirit of swashbuckling: fun. "You cheated!" accuses Orlando Bloom's prissy blacksmith after his opponent gets street with him. "Pirate," shrugs Depp, by way of explanation.

It's a bit surprising to find the swashbuckling genre scaling the battlements again. Existing in its own archaic universe where bravery isn't bravery but derring-do (heroic courage), it all seems a little naive in 2003. *Pirates ...* has been touted as the resurrection of a forgotten genre that died in the 1950s with Errol Flynn. But, in fact, in the last few years alone, we've had *The Musketeer*, *Count Of Monte Cristo*, *The Mask Of Zorro*, *The Man In The Iron Mask* and *Don Juan De Marco*. They all peddle their different interpretations of swashbuckling, but *The Mask Of Zorro* is the sharpest blade on offer. Ageing Zorro Anthony Hopkins lets his protege Antonio Banderas in on the key secret of the swashbuckler:

"You have passion and your skill is growing. But ... I must give you something which is completely beyond your reach: charm."

How you carry yourself is all to the swashbuckler. The assorted pirates, rebels and adventurers who appear in swashbuckling films might occasionally give the impression that they're interested in higher things, like "defending freedom" or pursuing "true love". This is a mistake: if Robin Hood had just been interested in protecting the poor and not in looking good/having fun while he was doing it, he'd just have been a kind of medieval crusty squatting in Sherwood's trees. Never mind ideals, Errol Flynn, in the 1938 *The Adventures Of Robin Hood*, swashbuckling's finest hour, is in it to lap up the OTHER benefits. At the end, King Richard's first requirement of his loyal subject is that he gets hitched to Marian. His merry men huddle round and the king happily asks: "What say you to that, Baron of Locksley?" But, his bride on his arm, Robin's out the door faster than the closing credits - "May I obey all your commandments with equal pleasure, sire!" - leaving little doubt what's on the menu in 30 seconds' time (sexual innuendo).

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Of course, the interest in stylish behavior carries itself over to attire (clothing) - and what's more current than that? With the current fondness for new romantic, swashbuckling seems to be in the air. No one says you have to look good, exactly; just carry it off with confidence. Take Depp in *Pirates Of The Caribbean*: dreads threaded with seafaring trinkets, a frilly shirt and eye make-up. He should suffer a merciless fashion keelhauling (punishment) but, wearing it all with a nonchalant demeanor apparently based on Keith Richards, it's a dandyish coup de theatre (he pulls it off).

It's not an easy thing to pull off. The best pointers are to be found in the heyday (peak) of these films, in the 1920s and 1930s. Egged on by a cinema excited at the possibilities of its own existence, the men who came to be associated with swashbuckling - Douglas Fairbanks, Flynn, Basil Rathbone, Tyrone Power - radiated huge enjoyment in enthusiastic fencing, firing arrows over castle walls, clasping women in vice-like embraces and generally being on the silver screen.

The early swashbucklers came in two main cycles: one started in 1920 by Fairbanks' *The Mask Of Zorro*, the latter in 1935 by Flynn's *Captain Blood*. Fairbanks defined the easy physicality and lusty spirit of the films, but Flynn is the undisputed master. Never seen without a smirky grin, *Captain Blood* is a wonky piratical treat. *The Adventures Of Robin Hood* is even better: it'd be hard to find a better summary of the swashbuckling spirit than the scene in which, after the hunting of stag is banned across the land, Robin Hood walks into Nottingham Castle, dumps a deer on the sheriff's table and goads the Norman throng. "Why, you speak treason!" says Lady Marian. "Fluently!" replies Flynn.

Flynn's own life, told with shameless enterprise in his autobiography *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, gave him good grounding for this kind of work. The descendant of a crewman on a real adventure ship, he was a signed-up practitioner of wanderlust, putting active emphasis on both parts of the word. Running plantations, gold-prospecting and dodging headhunters in Papua New Guinea by his late teens, he finds himself biting off sheeps' testicles for a living before embarking on a tour of the world's brothels and illicit cockfighting dens with an inordinately hairy Dutchman and finally launching his acting career in England. It's quite a read. At some point in each chapter, a sentence along the lines of "And then I saw her ..." invariably crops up.

Flynn's career stalled in the early 1950s, amid statutory rape accusations, heavy drinking and introspection. Meanwhile, the swashbuckler exited Hollywood stage left, a victim of prevailing reluctance to make costly historical extravaganzas and growing fondness for more realistic films. But its spirit has never been extinguished. Richard Lester's Dumas adaptations revived the genre in the 1970s and it's been springing up ever since, whether Luke Skywalker swinging across space station chasms with Leia or James Bond's cool wisecracking.

Swashbuckling pleasures are called for more than ever now. They come irony-proofed: people in masks vaulting from balconies onto horses already know they're being ridiculous - and celebrate it themselves. While we're straining to believe in CGI Iron Men and Hulks, we'll always want the sight of someone enjoying their work, we'll always like a chap doing his own stunts - Jackie Chan is an honorary swashbuckler - and in an age of blue-screen counterfeiting, swashbuckling will be at the window to rescue us. If that doesn't skewer you through the heart, you're already finished.