300: Rise of an Empire

R

102 Minutes

Rating: **** out of *****

Sequels are rarely as good as the original film, but 300: Rise of an Empire may be an exception. As a follow-up to 300 from 2006, Rise of an Empire continues to story of the war between the Persian Empire and ancient Greece that began in the previous film. 300 was an outrageous but highly stylized tour de force of violence based on one of the great last stands of all time. Rise of an Empire is just as violent, but takes the action from the desolate mountain pass where the eponymous 300 Spartans fought and died to the stormy seas, where the small navy of Athens challenges the numberless Persian fleet.

Of course, for all that both movies are based on historical events, nobody should confuse either film with actual history. True, there was a war between the city-states of Greece and Persia, and some of our characters—General Themistokles of Athens, his opposite number Artemisia, and Xerxes, King of Persia—did exist, but certainly not as they are portrayed in this movie. Does that matter? Not much. Neither 300 nor Rise of an Empire are meant to be documentaries. They are epics of heroism, blood, steel, and fire. As such, they are tremendous achievements.

With King Leonidas of Sparta from 300 dead, Themistokles becomes the central protagonist in Rise of an Empire. Themistokles has a lot in common with Leonidas, but as played by Sullivan Stapleton he comes across as a somewhat more level-headed hero than his Spartan counterpart. Themistokles doesn’t fight for the love of battle, but for the freedom of his beloved Greece. Leading the forces of Persia against Athens is Eva Green’s Artemisia, the beautiful, ruthless, and probably psychotic female commander of Xerxes’ navy. Green plays Artemisia with a wicked relish, and a diabolical gleam in her eye, and while her portrayal of the character is altogether anachronistic it’s still gloriously effective.

If anything, Rise of an Empire is even more action-packed than 300. Director Noam Murro throws wave after wave of bloody mayhem at the camera, and yet somehow manages to avoid both prurience and monotony. The battles each have their individual flavor, and the action escalates bit by bit to a powerful climax.

Fans of 300 won’t be disappointed with Rise of an Empire. Whether or not it’s better than its forerunner, the new film successfully replicates the earlier film’s incredible energy and epic (if bloody) grandeur.