

'Kasbah' inspired by true story of an Afghan woman

By Andrew Barker

More weeks after the horrific bombing of an Afghan hospital and President Obama's announcement of extended US military presence in the region, this weekend might not prove to have been an ideal moment to release a film that treats the slow-motion tragedy of Afghanistan's recent history as an exotic backdrop for broad fish-out-of-water comedy. Then again, there will probably never be a good time to release a project as fundamentally misjudged and disjointed as "Rock the Kasbah." Extremely loosely inspired by the true story of Setara Hussainzada, an Afghan woman who braved death threats after appearing on the country's version of "American Idol," this Bill Murray starrer utterly fails to connect as an "Ishtar"-esque

Muslim-world farce, a cynical skewering of American foreign policy, or a cuddly, inspirational ode to the unifying power of music — and to the film's dubious credit, it does attempt all three. Commercial prospects do not look kosher.

Murray, who has rarely been less charming onscreen, stars as Richie Lanz, a loathsomely loudmouthed, down-on-his-luck music manager. Serving up tall tales of his decades in the trenches — depending on his audience, he'll claim to have either discovered Madonna outside a Hamburger Hamlet, or convinced Jimi Hendrix to play "The Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock — he's been reduced to scamming hopeless no-talents from his home-office in Van Nuys. He has one actual client, a cover-band singer-slash-secretary named Ronnie (Zoëy Deschanel), and so little to go on that when a

whiskey-guzzling passerby at a karaoke bar suggests he take Ronnie out for a USO tour of Afghanistan, he books the next flight to Kabul.

Stealing

Once there, Ronnie takes one look at the bombed-out cityscape and flees, stealing Richie's money and passport on her way. Being the type of character who rarely responds to situations in a recognizable human way, Richie deals with this dilemma by tagging along with a friendly pair of Herbalife salesmen turned gun runners (Scott Caan, Danny McBride) for a wild night out. Cruising through the mean streets of Kabul in a convertible, smoking pot, cracking wise, dodging armed gangs and finally alighting at a heavily fortified disco, the two resemble a pair of Colonel Kurtzes who went upriver

only to discover the Electric Daisy Carnival waiting for them, and for a few precious minutes, the film suggests a sharp turn into satire.

Alas, Richie soon ditches them to meet cute with Merci (Kate Hudson), an American hooker with a heart of gold who runs a one-woman brothel from a trailer behind the club. The next morning, he's waylaid by the steely-eyed mercenary (Bruce Willis) who smuggled Ronnie out of Afghanistan for half payment; now he's demanding the other \$1,000 out of Richie by day's end. To raise the money, Richie agrees to take a shipment of ammunition down into the rural Paktia province, accompanied by his trusty, disco-loving, unpaid taxi driver-interpreter (Arian Moayed). Nearly killed by an IED in the desert, he's accosted by a group of Pashtun men on horseback, who insist that he stay the night in their

village as an honored guest.

It's at this point, at least an hour into the film, that one realizes just how many ludicrous narrative contrivances the filmmakers have had to laboriously string together to bring their American protagonist into contact with the Afghan singer who will finally set the story in motion. In any case, it's here that Richie first hears the mellifluous voice of Salima (Leem Lubany), a village girl secretly practicing Cat Stevens songs in a cave.

Forbidden

Though she is culturally forbidden to sing in public, Richie recognizes a potential great when he hears one, and helps smuggle her to Kabul to compete on "Afghan Star," a real-life singing competition show that swept the nation a decade ago.

With so much superfluous plotting

going on — there's hardly even time to mention the rival tribe of golf-loving, heroin-producing warlords, or the arms-trader conspiracy, or Richie's precocious, estranged daughter back home, or his inexplicable romance-cum-business partnership with the abruptly retired Merci — "Rock the Kasbah" struggles to find any sort of center at all. Screenwriter Mitch Glazer (who previously wrote the incalculably superior "Scrooged" for Murray) happens upon a few promising ideas, but rather than pick one to meaningfully explore, he simply grinds them all together into an unpalatable slurry. Most egregiously, though she seemingly ought to have equal billing in the story, Salima's role is almost a glorified cameo, and we scarcely even get to hear enough of her singing to understand why Richie is so enamored. (RTRS)

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Models present creations by Russian designer Yegor Zaitsev during the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Russia in Moscow on Oct 21. (AFP) — Sao Paulo Page 21

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Craig's half-smile count higher than usual

'Spectre' particular treat for 007 nerds

LOS ANGELES, Oct 22, (RTRS): "The dead are alive" are the very first words printed onscreen in "Spectre," the 24th and far-from-last James Bond adventure. It's a statement that could be viewed as a pre-emptive spoiler, a sly double-bluff or a swaggering boast from a death-defying franchise that, ricocheting from London to Rome to Morocco across action sequences of deliriously daft extravagance, the pic accumulates a veritable Pompeii of mighty, crumbling structures. What's missing is the unexpected emotional urgency of "Skyfall," as the film sustains its predecessor's nostalgia kick with a less sentimental bent. A wealth of iconography — both incidental and integral — from the series' founding chapters is revived here, making "Spectre" a particular treat for 007 nerds, and a businesslike blast for everyone else. Spectre-ular B.O. awaits, though it remains to be seen whether the "Skyfall" is the limit.

The series-crowning crossover success of "Skyfall" three years ago — yielding not just \$1 billion worldwide but breathless reviews, two Oscars and even a BAFTA for best British film — places "Spectre" in a tricky returning position. The franchise may have been a consistent performer over 53 years, but never before has it been saddled with the prestige expectations that the new film is now notionally expected to meet. With Mendes' tony cachet once more in place (minus the copilot of revered d.p. Roger Deakins), and a hefty (if not entirely justified) runtime of 148 minutes, "Spectre" outwardly appears to be shooting for equivalently grandiose status.

Yet even before the opening credits are cued up (accompanied by Sam Smith's drea-

ry, melody-averse theme song, thankfully the least propulsive thing here), one senses that Mendes and producers Michael G. Wilson and Barbara Broccoli have, somewhat paradoxically, set out to surprise by resetting the status quo — albeit with a few administrative complications. The death of Judi Dench's M at the climax of "Skyfall" raised the personal stakes for the usually impermeable Bond in a fashion that can't be automatically repeated one installment later.

The indefatigable agent's solution, and in turn the film's, is to get stoically back to work almost as if nothing had happened, and let the baggage emerge where it may. And while Daniel Craig's reputation as the series' sternest Bond stands intact when the ride — rumored to be his last — is over, his half-smile count is higher than usual. A handful of wily quips, meanwhile, point to the addition of rough-and-tumble Brit playwright Jez Butterworth to the sturdy "Skyfall" writing team of John Logan, Neal Purvis and Robert Wade.

Sequence

Consequently, there's a little more room in "Spectre" for Bond's customary hobbies — globe-trotting, red-blooded lady-killing and cold-blooded not-lady-killing — than in the comparatively contemplative "Skyfall." The tone is set by an enthralling, expensively ludicrous opening sequence, set in Mexico City on the Day of the Dead, that ranks among the great 007 intros. Weaving through the jubilant masses, Hoyte van Hoytema's dust-veiled camera alights on Bond in masked skeleton costume, luring a local

bombshell ("Miss Bala's" Stephanie Sigman) back to his hotel room before the quickest of quick changes finds him suited, booted and planting a hit on venal Italian mafioso Sciarra (Alessandro Cremona) from the rooftop. Cue explosions, architectural carnage and vertigo-inducing physical combat in a helicopter careering perilously over the city's crowded Caesario square.

Transitory

The narrative takeaway from all this eye-popping activity turns out to be rather puny: In winning the fistfight, Bond secures his opponent's ring, engraved with a telling insignia. It's a typically circuitous outcome in a film that, certainly in its MacGuffin-stacked opening hour, feels somewhat underplotted: Large expanses of "Spectre" play as diverting but diversionary action travelogue, as one transitory character in an exotic locale leads our hero to another, in pursuit of opponents who don't really get to bare their teeth until the halfway mark.

Back in London, Bond is grounded for his unauthorized Mexican hijinks by Ralph Fiennes' exasperated replacement M. The new boss's crankiness is forgivable, given other professional worries on his plate — most of them involving Brylcreem-slick new M15 boss Max Denbigh (a splendid Andrew Scott), codenamed C, who is spearheading a reorganization of Britain's intelligence departments that could see the entire 00 program shut down. Bond considerably stays out of his hair by flagrantly disregarding his orders, jetting off to Rome and, professional that he is, promptly seducing Sciarra's not-

so-grieving widow (an underused Monica Bellucci). While there, he also gains access to a secret meeting of a shady global cooperative, presided over with calmly lethal authority by the mysterious Franz Oberhauser (Christoph Waltz).

With the assistance of his authority-flouting M16 underlings Moneypenny (Naomie Harris) and Q (Ben Whishaw), and via a brief catch-up with "Casino Royale" and "Quantum of Solace" antagonist White (Jesper Christensen), Bond ultimately makes contact in Austria with Madeleine Swann (Lea Seydoux), a young doctor with a dark past who identifies Oberhauser's operation as the powerful, terrorism-inclined Spectre. That confirms the title's promised resurrection of a collective enemy that has featured in six previous 007 romps, though none since 1971's "Diamonds Are Forever." (Bond buffs, meanwhile, will have been counting the visual nods of Spectre's signature octopus logo up to this point, most of them in the tentacular credit sequence.)

Any further plot revelations would be hazardous. Suffice to say that the unveiling of Spectre cues a modern-day rewrite of classic Bond myths, teasing the audience with wry winks to series-affiliated imagery and gimmicky dating back to the Sean Connery era, from white cats to ejector seats. (The 1960s revival isn't even kept strictly inhouse: One of several breakneck car chases pays passing tribute to "The Italian Job.") The film finally hits fifth gear when Waltz's louche villain emerges from the shadows, though he's not as eerily vivid or playful an opposing presence as Javier Bardem's Silva in "Skyfall."

LOS ANGELES: Fox Searchlight is developing a remake of the documentary "Meet The Patels," with the sister-brother team of Geeta V. Patel and Ravi V. Patel returning to co-direct from their own script.

Ravi starred as himself in the film, which won the audience award in June at the Los Angeles Film Festival. As he turns 30, the first-generation Indian-American is pressured by his parents to agree to an arranged marriage and agrees to make a serious effort to find a partner — while not telling his parents that he's recently broken up with a woman because she's not Indian.

His sister filmed her brother's discussion of his experiences along with his dates. Janet Eckholm produced the documentary.

Alchemy released the movie on Sept. 11 and the film has performed solidly with \$1.15 million in grosses. At its widest release, it was in 101 locations. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Marvel has tapped "Ant-Man" director Peyton Reed to helm the next installment, "Ant-Man and the Wasp," coming out in July 2018, sources tell Variety.

Reed is currently in negotiations to direct. If a deal closes, he would join cast members Paul Rudd, Michael Douglas and Evangeline Lilly, who are expected to return.

Plot details are unknown, other than that the film revolves around Marvel's smallest hero as he teams up with Lilly's Wasp character, who is teased at the end of the original. Kevin Feige is producing

the pic, and no writer has been tapped to pen the movie yet. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Naomie Harris, Andre Holland and Mahershala Ali are starring in coming-of-age drama "Moonlight," with production starting in Miami.



Patel



Rudd

A24, Plan B and Adele Romanski are producing with Barry Jenkins directing from his own script, based on the play "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue" by Tarell McCraney. A24 is fully financing and owns worldwide rights with a fall 2016 release planned. "Moonlight" tells the story of Chiron, a young man who

comes of age during "War on Drugs"-era Miami. It's structured in three different time periods as Chiron battles a deteriorating home life and deals with his dawning sexuality. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Natalie Portman's troubled Western "Jane Got a Gun" has finally

gotten a trailer.

Mars Films released on Wednesday the international teaser for the film, in which Portman plays a frontier woman who teams with her ex-lover (Joel Edgerton) to save her outlaw husband (Noah Emmerich) from a gang out to kill him.

"Where ... is ... my ... child?"

Portman asks one of the gang members in between shots.

The Weinstein Co will release the film in February. Relativity Media lost the movie just before the company filed for bankruptcy on July 30. Originally slated for Aug 29, 2014, "Jane's" release has been delayed several times in the last two years. (RTRS)