

# Reviews

CINEMA

## AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER

A sea change



▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

PG | 192 minutes

▶ Director **James Cameron**

▶ Cast **Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana,**

**Sigourney Weaver, Kate Winslet,**

**Stephen Lang, Cliff Curtis**

🕒 **Avatar: The Way Of Water**

starts with some scene-setting: sweeping shots of Pandora's floating mountains, dangerous jungles, and sprawling oceans. As Stephen Lang's Colonel Quaritch declared 13 years ago: "We're not in Kansas any more." In fact, despite having died from two arrows through the chest, Quaritch repeats the line in the sequel – but now he's a blue Na'vi. There's a lot to catch up on...

Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), the human-turned-Na'vi who we last saw beating his former species out of Pandora, has started a family with his beloved Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). They have two sons, a daughter, and an adopted human boy. The Sullys have also taken in a daughter born of Dr Grace Augustine's deceased avatar (with both mother and child

played by Sigourney Weaver). Because, as we all know, no one ever really dies in sci-fi.

After a few years of peace (or 10 minutes of screen time), the Sky People are back on Pandora and destroying its forests. Earth, it turns out, has become uninhabitable, and its people are seeking a new world to pillage. There's just one problem: the natives are still angry. So the invading humans set out to kill Jake Sully in the hope of ending the rebellions.

They install Quaritch's memories into a Na'vi body (a "recombinant") in order to utilise his knowledge of Pandora. There's frankly an awful lot of exposition as we catch up on what's happened in the decade since the original *Avatar*, but once we're finally up to speed, director James Cameron starts doing what he does best: producing explosive, breathless, high-stakes action anchored by unparalleled CG.

While the marketing for the film has been all about water, the first time we see the ocean (other than during the opening montage)



comes an hour in, after the Sullys are forced from their home and must seek sanctuary with the sea clans. You need that hour, though, just to get used to the way the movie looks.

Cameron filmed certain sections at 48 frames a second to minimise screen strobing, resulting in some miraculously smooth and immersive scenes. But – and it's a big but – the illusion is broken every time a human steps on-screen. There's a fluidity to human motion here that's weirdly unnatural, making the expensive and impressive CG suddenly look

“Explosive, breathless, high-stakes action with unparalleled CG”

like a PlayStation 2 game. It's not quite *The Hobbit* again, but it comes close in places.

Come the ocean scenes, when the humans are gone and the underwater world becomes home, the film blossoms. Like the first *Avatar*, the sequel slowly submerges us in this new world as Cameron does some sublime





Neytiri and Jake prove it ain't easy being blue.

world-building. There are extended sequences of teenagers hanging out with whales, fathers getting annoyed at their sons and hair tendrils connecting with ancestral trees. When the action does ramp up again during the third hour, the film climaxes with a dazzling sequence that plays like a run-through of Cameron's greatest hits: *Aliens*, *The Abyss* and especially *Titanic*.

It's a thrilling finale that, just when you think it's over, keeps going, the tension rising and rising until it becomes almost unbearable – all rooted in emotion and

sentimentality that's never overwrought.

Structurally, the story feels more akin to a television show than a film; there's no definitive main character, with Cameron splitting his attention between Jake, Quaritch and the kids. Worthington and Lang are highlights, while Weaver's casting as a teenager is distracting, the CG struggling to cover up her decades of worldly experience.

There's also a disappointing lack of Zoe Saldana's Neytiri, so brilliant in the original, while Kate Winslet's newcomer Ronal barely

registers (and that's to say nothing of cameo roles for Edie Falco and Jemaine Clement).

Despite these flaws, when you give in to *The Way Of Water* it's hypnotic. Thirteen years ago, there were reports of cinemagoers having anxiety attacks after leaving multiplexes, wishing they could go back to Pandora. Those wishes have now been granted. See this on the biggest screen you can – you won't be in Kansas any more. **Jack Shepherd**

**i** Kate Winslet broke Tom Cruise's record for longest-held breath while shooting a scene: just over seven minutes underwater.



## STEPHEN LANG

Colonel Quaritch in *Avatar: The Way Of Water*



### How has performance capture evolved since the first *Avatar*?

→ Some of the facial capture has certainly evolved, but I don't think the mocap suits have changed much in 13 years! I think the major technical innovation between *Avatar* and *The Way Of Water* is the underwater performance capture. It was impossible to conceive how to do that until Jim [Cameron] decided, "Well, we've got to do it. Let's figure out how."

### Quaritch is the antagonist in *Avatar*, but some people see him as the hero. How do you regard the character and the public's response to him?

→ There are characters that you love to hate and perhaps he's one of those. There are also characters you hate yourself for loving, and maybe he's that for some people, too. He's got qualities that are of interest, and some of them are laudable – he's got his own brand of courage and he's extremely loyal. Are there people who like him *because* he hates the Na'vi? Yeah, I guess there are, but I would not say that Quaritch is a racist. Mission-oriented is what he is. **RE**

KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE