



Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull

Harrison Ford, Shia LaBeouf, and Cate Blanchett star in a film written by David Koepp, George Lucas, and Jeff Nathanson, and directed by Steven Spielberg.

By Josef Woodard

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It's hard to believe, but it was 1981 when Indiana Jones burst on the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, thanks to the imagineering and commercial cunning of Steven Spielberg. Back then, the swaggering and professorial Harrison Ford character — with his goofy hat, bullwhip, and John Williams's theme song — captured the fancy of moviegoers seeking old-school adventurism. Déjà vu all over again dictates that Jones/Harrison would be reincarnated eventually; it just took almost 20 years to do.

Sure enough, here he is again for the fourth installment, gracefully aged and flung ahead in time to the Cold War era of the late '50s. It's okay to have Russians as villains again, including the lovely Cate Blanchett as dogged ringleader. Throw some Maya-Martian axis into the harebrained narrative mix and voilà! We have the first blockbuster of the pre-summer era, primed for box office whiz-bang.

Even if the script — from a story cowritten by original cocreator George Lucas — feels stale and labored at times, Spielberg gives us plenty to admire here on sensory levels. Production values are high and seamless, and the storytelling is crafty, moving from an atom-bomb testing zone in Nevada to Jones's tweedy East Coast college home base and on to the archeologist-cum-adventurer playground in Peru. There are sequel-linking twists along the way regarding the relationship between Jones, old-cast member Karen Allen, and young Shia LeBeouf, but mostly it's business as usual, with slow detective-like passages interspersed with skillfully anxiety-inducing chase scenes and a climactic finale, this time involving a swirling CGI vortex of pre-Colombian/alien post-*Apocalypto* energy.

There's something comforting about the lack of surprises or evolution in the franchise, apart from the natural advances in computer-generated FX. While the outside world has turned nasty during the past two decades, Spielberg's more innocuous retro comic-book venture preserves a rare family-suitable innocence. On the other hand, there's something slightly depressing and anti-creative at work. Apart from his occasional sideways steps into artful terrain, Spielberg has mostly been tending a filmography as amusement park for the past 30 years. Here's his latest ride, an update of the old one.

With *Crystal Skull* we're reminded that in Hollywood, you can and probably should try to go home again, but the neighborhood and the fashions may well have changed

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