

Arts



Tragic lovers: Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet as Jack and Rose in *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron, below. The scene in which Jack perishes in the Atlantic, left, has been hotly debated by fans

20 years on, the epic that can't be sunk

As 'Titanic' celebrates two decades, devotee *Kat Brown* pays tribute to James Cameron's weepie, aka the last great blockbuster

Be honest now. Were you one of the people who kept *Titanic* on top of the box office for 15 weeks? When did you first cry, at Gloria Stuart's old Rose talking about the people who died, or the captain standing at his wheel while his ship went down? Did you consider buying a replica of Rose's Heart of the Ocean necklace? And, most pressingly, are you convinced that Jack could have survived if only he'd shared that board with Rose?

Never mind the face that launched a thousand ships, *Titanic* – which celebrates its 20th anniversary this month – was the ship that launched a thousand crazes, turned Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio into heartthrobs, and made the world wild about naval tragedy. So wild, in fact, that one 11-year-old fan in Nova Scotia held a Titanic-themed birthday party in 1998 that involved visiting the victims' graveyard and two guests howling, "I'm the king of the world" while running through the headstones.

Titanic's \$2-billion-plus box office record has since been beaten, but the film – a blend of special effects spectacle and old-fashioned romance, powered by the genuine chemistry of its stars – is still without equal. Set

against today's incessant assault of superhero movies, it stands proud as the last great blockbuster. With Hollywood now obsessed with sequels and existing intellectual properties, it's hard to imagine any studio agreeing to spend all the money in the world on an original story of such ambition and scale. It conquered the world, yet *Titanic* was so nearly an utter disaster.

Gently soundtrack by a tin whistle and the Enya-like voice of Norwegian singer Sissel (director James Cameron wanted the Irish singer but she turned him down), the film told the story of poor itinerant artist Jack, and Rose, a society girl whose widowed mother is marrying her off for money. They meet and fall in love on the doomed ship. A luxury cross between a Merchant Ivory picture and a disaster epic, *Titanic* was the most expensive film ever made at the time: an apparent fool's errand for action director Cameron.

The shoot was riven with problems. The budget spiralled to \$200 million, leading to predictions that the movie would be a complete turkey. This wasn't helped by production delays and Paramount pushing the release back by six months. Cast and crew, barely getting by on four hours' sleep a night, caught colds and infections from prolonged periods in the water tanks – Winslet, who didn't wear a wetsuit under her costume, developed



pneumonia. And on the final night of shooting in Nova Scotia, the clam chowder served to cast and crew was spiked with the drug PCP, sending 80 people to hospital.

So it was a shock when Cameron's three-hour baby was released and broke box office records. Cinemas physically wore out their copies of the film through overuse, and *Titanic* won 11 Oscars – Cameron recently revealed that he nearly hit Harvey Weinstein with one of them during the ceremony, when the now-disgraced producer offended him. The director really was the king of the world.

At a time when irony was all the rage in cinema, *Titanic* was something else: fun but never cynical. Every girl at my school was haunted by the image of the elderly couple hugging each other on their bed as they prepare to die – the film's grace is going for simple feeling over schmaltz.

That's not to say *Titanic* took itself completely seriously. It's a toss-up as to who chews more scenery; Billy Zane as Rose's magnificently self-satisfied

fiancé Cal (surely even Harry and Meghan would balk at an "engagement gala"), or Danny Nucci as Jack's Italian pal Fabrizio, about as convincingly Italian as the Dolmio family.

That first half is a film in itself; a gorgeous, charismatic romance in impeccable period surroundings, before launching into the harrowing devastation of what happened after the ship hit that iceberg. The quarter-hour that bridges the two is agony, even before Rose goes down to the suddenly flooded E deck to rescue Jack and she, and we, suddenly realise how dreadful a situation this is. First-class passengers serenely drink brandy while third-class are forbidden from climbing the stairs – Cameron's unflinching eye has us bear witness to it all, and then kills off Jack to boot.

Winslet's vivacious performance scored her an Oscar nomination, but poor Jack's noble sacrifice didn't butter any parsnips with the Academy. When news of DiCaprio's snub broke, it was contacted by more than 200 people demanding a recount. "The

calls did not just come from teenagers," a spokesman said. "One older woman called and said the whole state of Florida was upset." (DiCaprio quickly recovered: his \$2.5 million *Titanic* salary ballooned to \$21 million for his next film, *The Beach*.)

Both leads were at their new-star



best: DiCaprio, eyes like chips off the iceberg, Nineties curtains flapping in the wind; and Winslet, impeccably styled in 1912 fashions, topped with hennaed hair and Mac Spice lip liner. Web pages, still a relatively new thing in 1998, were built by fans to show how much they adored DiCaprio, Winslet – and Céline Dion.

James Horner's score, and his song for Dion, *My Heart Will Go On*, played no small part in sending *Titanic* stratospheric. I regularly sobbed myself to sleep listening to Graham Torrington's syndicated *Late Night Love* show, which featured a special radio edit of the song with emotive extracts from the script. It began with Gloria Stuart talking about the hope with which passengers got on board. By the time Winslet stuttered, "I'm so cold, Jack," I was a mess, but luckily Dion was there to bellow us through a key change and out the other side.

But not everyone appreciated such a soapy romp; it also drew enormous ire from Cameron's fans. Bear in mind that until this point, his most romantic film moment had involved Jamie Lee Curtis and Arnold Schwarzenegger dancing a tango before going off to blow up spies. It took barely a month for the backlash to begin. In 2012, *Entertainment Weekly* observed that *Titanic* was the first film to fall victim to online "hater culture". It was, wrote critic Owen Gleiberman, "a huge, powerful, ambitious movie, by a geek-god filmmaker, that actually dared to be innocent about love. For if there's one thing that internet culture, with its immersion in hipness, control, technology, and a certain masculine mystique that binds all those things together, cannot abide, it is romantic innocence."

Titanic fans' ardour can seem a bit extreme to the uninitiated. Devotees have long argued over whose hand it was up against the steaming cab window during Rose and Jack's sex scene, and how either could possibly have moved that way given they were at a completely different angle shortly afterwards. And an internet theory, showing how Jack and Rose could both have fitted on that board in the icy Atlantic, was so hotly contested that the TV science show *Mythbusters* debunked it, concluding that it could only have been possible had they used Rose's life jacket for buoyancy.

"I think it's all kind of silly, really, that we're having this discussion 20 years later," Cameron told *Vanity Fair* this week, presumably while staring at the ceiling and mouthing "spare me". He added: "But it does show that the film was effective in making Jack so endearing to the audience that it hurts them to see him die. Had he lived, the ending of the film would have been meaningless... The film is about death and separation; he had to die. So whether it was that, or whether a smoke stack fell on him, he was going down. It's called art, things happen for artistic reasons, not for physics reasons."

Titanic, currently berthed at Netflix, deserves very much to be looked on again. From the moment Rose emerges from under her giant hat, to her elder self being reunited with Jack, and all those who died, forever this time, you are completely and utterly under their spell. Joy, romance and hope have a place in our biggest stories, even if – and maybe especially if – they involve disaster. Cameron was right. It's not physics – it's art.

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