

# The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou

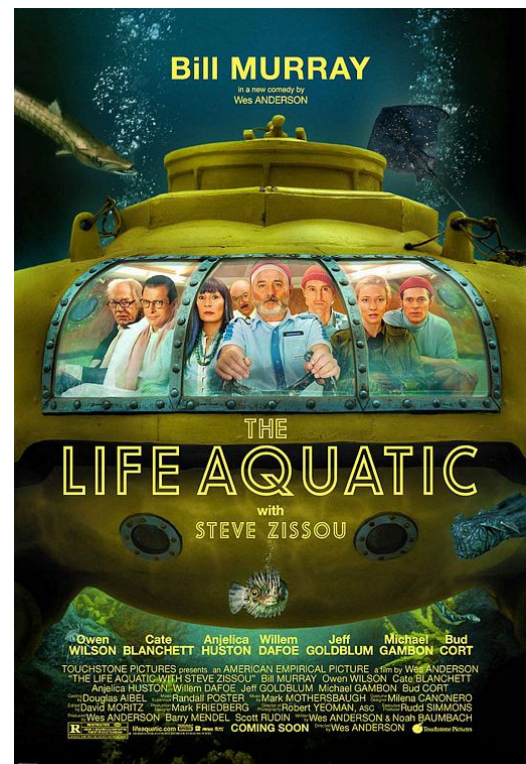
## Review By Megan Spencer, 2005

*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* is Wes Anderson's fourth feature and his most ambitious yet.

You could even say it is his most 'Wes Anderson' movie so far, a film that aggressively pushes the envelope when it comes to defining the very essence of his work.

After all, Anderson is a filmmaker who, like 'a Fellini' or 'a Scorsese', now has an entire genre attributed to him.

His is made up of often idiosyncratic, maudlin characters (think Max Fischer from *Rushmore*, Margot Tennenbaum from *The Royal Tennenbaums*); layer upon layer of intricate plot detail; a superb hand-made aesthetic, heightened sense of the absurd, all wrapped in a blanket crocheted from the seething silence family of dysfunction.



Just when you think Anderson couldn't dive any deeper into his unique oeuvre, he delivers *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, a film so dense, odd, emotional and funny, you'll drown in tears and laughter.

In the 1970s Jacques Cousteau was a superhero to millions of kids around the world via his weekly seafaring action-adventure TV series, 'The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau'. One of these bowl-fringed kids was Anderson. *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* is an out-and-out tribute to the late Frenchman, and then some.

Anderson's regular collaborator/muse Bill Murray (*Lost In Translation*) plays seafaring action hero-come-underwater-filmmaker Steve Zissou, a fella modelled on real-life marine adventurer Jacques Cousteau. Resplendent in a red woolly cap - and with a crew of loyal, disparate souls at his disposal - we meet Mr. Zissou just as he sets out on a journey of revenge. His best friend and partner has just been ignominiously eaten by a wayward 'jaguar' shark (he thinks anyway), and to avenge his honour Steve must find the shark and do it in. He declares to the press that this will be his "most ambitious" film project to date.

In the eccentric style to which Wes Anderson fans have become accustomed, before we can even draw breath an extraordinary eighteen characters are introduced in splendid, intricate detail.

They include crew member and crooning Brazilian rock star, Seu Jorge (he covers early Bowie songs in Portugese throughout the film in beautiful musical narration); next his now ex-wife Eleanor (Anjelica Huston); English journalist Jane Winslett-Richardson (Cate Blanchett), pregnant but along for the ride; first mate Klaus Daimler (a very funny Willem Dafoe), and Ned Plimpton (Owen Wilson in a lovely understated role), an airline co-pilot who may or may not be Steve's illegitimate son.

Then there's Steve's amazing sea vessel, the 'Belafonte', a craft composed of staff quarters, leisure areas and oh yes, a movie studio.

Recently a critic wrote of *The Life Aquatic*: "the chief problem [with the film] is that there is so much to admire and so little to adore." Certainly Anderson's over-attenuated embroidery of each detail can be a little overwhelming, but surely by the time you get to *The Life Aquatic* you'd have worked out whether Anderson's style was a deal-breaker or not?



Publicity still from 'The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou'.

If you step back from his films it's abundantly clear that, while Anderson loves showing off he has a larger, more important agenda at work: to explore family dysfunction (specifically between fathers and their children), and the sadness that goes with it. It *is* the overarching theme of his work.

Granted, oftentimes when you're in the thick of the minutiae, exposition and tom-foolery, it can feel as if the film might topple from the sheer weight of it all. But that's the precise moment Anderson pulls back the curtain to reveal very authentic characters breathing slowly, in real time, and exhaling with authentic emotion. That's *The Life Aquatic*.

Anderson's films *are* a tour through arthouse film and universal fairytales; he makes no apology for that. But he speaks with a unique voice to which an entire generation of people - corn-fed on all sorts of popular culture and media – respond in spades.

Suffice to say, fans of Wes Anderson will die for *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*. His detractors will hate it.

And anyone who loves watching a wonderful young artist stretch the boundaries of film and uphold the best aspects of storytelling should see it, *pronto!*

For more about Wes Anderson's films, visit [rushmoreacademy.com](http://rushmoreacademy.com)

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