

Film Takes Powerful Look at the 'Titanic' Disaster

By Pete Brooks
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What do you do for an encore after you've written and directed the most successful motion picture of all time?

James Cameron, writer/director of 1997's Oscar-winning "Titanic," has ended his six-year self-imposed exile from the big screen with a 3-D documentary on the same subject for the really, really big screen!

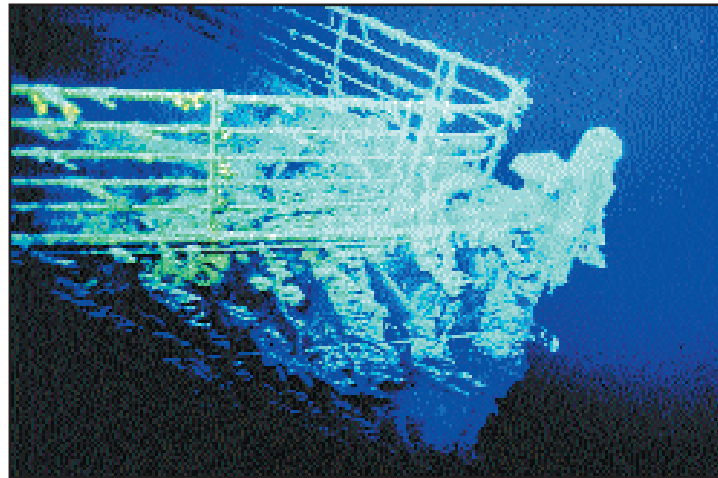
"Ghosts of the Abyss," the new film playing at the Esquire IMAX Theatre on K Street, is written, produced and directed by Cameron. Even six years later and counting, it is clear that the ship and the fate of its passengers have remained close to this filmmaker's heart.

As this was my first visit to an IMAX venue, I had no idea what to expect upon walking into the theater. The middle-schooler next to me summed up my feelings perfectly when he turned to his parents and enthused, "This is cool! This is awesome!"

The entire front wall — side to side and top to bottom, at least four stories high — constitutes the screen. The projected image, besides being overwhelmingly huge,

is so vivid and crisp it makes the sharpest DVD image look like the fuzziest impressionist doodle.

In addition to the biggest screen in town, the Esquire also boasts the most impres-



More than 1,500 people died when the Titanic sunk to the ocean floor.

sive surround sound system I've ever heard, 40 speakers in all, including a number of them positioned behind the screen, for a definitive "you are there" audio experience.

And this is all before the movie even starts!

After the house lights dim, the first images we see of the Titanic are from stereopticon slides, a clever filmmaking conceit that helps smooth the transition into the 3-D movie-going experience.

"Ghosts of the Abyss" is narrated by actor Bill Paxton, apparently a close Cameron friend as well as frequent onscreen collaborator.

Unlike Cameron, who has made dozens of dives to

doesn't exist to get the shot he wants, he invents it! The underwater robot cameras were designed by Cameron's brother, Mike, as was the underwater lighting array — which, like the cameras, was created specifically for this feature and was designed to shoot under 2 1/2 miles of water and in 3-D.

Clocking in at a brisk 59 minutes, the feature is all meat and muscle, with nary a wasted minute.

The filmmakers use a simple but effective cinematic device, superimposing period photographs and computer recreations over various parts of the wreckage. This gives an uncannily precise sense of place to even the most otherworldly looking underwater scenes.

While most of the ship looks every minute of its 90-plus years underwater, there is the occasional incongruous anomaly: the perfectly preserved bowler hat, the ornately decorated leaded dining room windows still intact, or Molly Brown's brass bed, still shoved up against the wall of her stateroom.

All of which serve to remind us, people lived here. And people died here.

In the end, this isn't a movie about a filmmaker's

hubris, the marvels of technology or even, as some Internet wags have suggested, about the hubris of technology. As its title implies, "Ghosts of the Abyss" is about the human cost when mankind's reach exceeds its grasp.

Cameron's treatment suggests that technology itself isn't the problem; it's only in the service of arrogance and greed — and in our own shortsightedness — that it becomes the tool of our self-destruction.

As the film draws to a close, the viewer is bombarded with dozens upon dozens of vintage photographs of actual victims of the ship's sinking. It gives the preceding film a context and gravity that lingered in this reviewer's mind long after the lights came up.

More information about the movie and its ground-breaking technology, as well as the shipwreck, can be found on the film's impressive Web site at <http://disney.go.com/disneypictures/ghosts>. The film runs through June 2 at the Esquire IMAX Theatre, 1211 K St.; phone (916) 443-4629 or check the Website www.imax.com/sacramento.