Last night I finished Black Sails, the Starz TV series set before the events of Treasure Island. Mixing fictional characters from Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel (James Flint, “Long” John Silver, Billy Bones, Ben Gunn, Israel Hands) with actual pirates (Jack Rackham, Anne Bonney, Charles Vane, Benjamin Hornigold, and Edward Teach) the show tells the events surrounding Nassau, a pirate haven and thorn in the side of the civilized European nations that would trade with the New World.

I have never seen a TV series receive such a mixed reception from the ardent fans to the despairing “I gave it a go but…no” crowd.

Ultimately, much of the negative comments have included reactions like “too slow / too boring / couldn’t get into it / too much talking / couldn’t get behind the characters” and so on.

Here’s my take.

Pirates have had a bad rap in recent years and mainly due to the “yo-ho-jolly-roger” portrayal of a certain Disney film series (granted, to many this is a hugely enjoyable and light-hearted world), and Black Sails has gone a long way to redress the balance.

It was a long shot. Disney’s portrayal is a glorified comic-book computer game portrayal that never lets the tongue leave it’s cheek and many fans of the films no doubt came to Black Sails with the thought “ooh, pirates! I love pirates! I want to watch a show about….hang on a minute, what’s this?”

Black Sails is not your quip-laden, quirky, comic portrayal with slick fight scenes and sassy comments and catch phrases- so if you’re looking for that, please stick to the Disney movies.

So what is it? When you boil down four seasons, what is Black Sails?

Intelligent, well-written, a beautifully acted drama portraying the depth of layered characters who are neither “good guys to root for” nor “bad guys to boo.”

This kind of show doesn’t come along very often. It demands high expectations of its audience and doesn’t pander to the general crowd. Black Sails stands head and shoulders above other shows with similar ideals, and if I were to generalize it’s fanbase, I would do so as follows:

Not every intelligent member of the television watching community likes black sails, but:-

Everyone who watches and enjoys Black Sails is an intelligent person.

This is not a show for the popcorn chewing crowd-pleasing generation who want to tune in, switch off, talk through a show and react appropriately to the funny/scary/exciting bits. Black Sails is a show that asks you to invest your time, patience, and perception in the characters and storylines- and rewards you a thousand times over if you do.

So what’s it about?

Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* tells the coming-of-age story of young Jim Hawkins and the discovery of a map to the treasure of the legendary Captain Flint. Jim sets out on an adventure as a cabin boy to the *Hispaniola* with friends amongst the commanding staff as well as the crew- in particular, the ship’s cook, “Long” John Silver.

Black Sails tells an origin story, a prequel of sorts. We know upon the opening of the credits that somewhere in this story, we are going to find Flint’s treasure, meet John Silver, Billy Bones, Ben Gunn, Israel Hands and Blind Pew.

Okay, we never actually meet Blind Pew, but we do meet the rest.

So what’s it about? Captain Flint goes after a Spanish treasure galleon, the *Urca D’Lima* containing a fortune- (Flint’s treasure) and attempts to find it, capture it, and secure it for no less a purpose than to fund a war against England in all its Georgian era might and pomposity.

Now, you imagine you were a pirate, with a crew, on an island run by piracy, where law and order didn’t exist, replaced with a fragile code of behavior created by pirate life. Your strength lay in how well you fought, bargained, connived, backstabbed, made alliances, broke alliances, and survived- and there’s a treasure up for grabs.

Now imagine all your friends at home, in work, anywhere in your life, were either crew with you, working against you, rivals to you- and they were all after the treasure too. Who would you trust? Who would you ally yourself with? Who, if they crossed you, would you be prepared to kill?

It’s that complex. It’s hard. People aren’t “goodies” or “baddies”- they all have an agenda, and it takes time while fortunes rise and fall, loyalties are won and lost, and through this rich tapestry of duplicity and danger, the story of Black Sails is woven.

Black sails excels at this- the realistic depiction of a pirate lifestyle, held together by a fragile peace, a thin code able to be broken at any time. The balance of power lies with those who people perceive have the power, and it’s addictive.

So who are the cast of the show? How good are their portrayals of the characters?

Toby Stephens plays Captain Flint- a man driven by a secret, the most feared and formidable pirate in the business, a man of intelligence, drive, and charisma. Toby plays the merry hell out of Flint in all four seasons and drives forward this man of ambition with aggression, charisma, and simmering violence. This is not a Captain Jack Sparrow who, quite honestly, I can’t see any crew following his insane savvy. Flint walks the scenes as a real Captain. If this story was your reality, would you follow Flint? It takes a first-rate actor to inspire loyalty and portray charismatic brilliance, even when you know his ambition would sacrifice anyone along the way- and Toby Stephens deserves an award for his portrayal.

Luke Arnold plays John Silver: this is an enigma, a survivor, and you’re so caught up in his story you forget that you know very little about him- and that’s Silver’s charm. He’s a man unashamedly putting himself first before everyone else, and on paper, such narcissism is hard to like- but Luke Arnold has charm, charisma, and likability in every scene. If you knew him, would you like him? Would you call him a friend? I think most people would say yes. Would you trust him? Hell, no! Silver’s journey is the greatest arc of all four seasons. He begins with both his legs, and you know at some point, he’s going to lose one to become Treasure Island’s Long John Silver with his crutch and peg-leg. Developing from self-serving survivor to…something entirely different, Luke Arnold has had an actors’ dream role and deserves every accolade for his outstanding performance.

Tom Hopper plays Billy Bones- William “Bones” Manderley, the tall, honest and supportive member of the crew who ascends to Quartermaster and more. The conscience to Captain Flint, the voice of the crew, distrustful of Silver, it’s easy to like Billy and, by the fourth season, easy to see how Billy’s perception has led to the role he ultimately comes to play. This doesn’t diminish the character: far from it- the arc Billy has to endure, and the stunning performance by Tom Hopper makes you care for him and hoping for a different ending to the one he eventually receives.

Hannah New plays Eleanor Guthrie. Nassau, the pirate town around which the stories revolve, begins the show as the spider at the center of the web. She handles every cargo, every resale, and acts as an arbiter between disputes, and source of information for rival crews. Eleanor Guthrie isn’t someone you want to cross- as determined and resourceful as any Captain, probably more so, she handles the delicate balance of Nassau’s existence preying on, but not antagonizing the colonial Empires that sail the Spanish Main. Her arc is complex, her reasons sound, and it’s easy to identify with the choices she makes- even though those choices lead her down an altogether unexpected path that weaves closely with the fate of the very pirate Captains she supports. I’d only ever seen Hannah in the Snow White movie but this series made me a fan- and I’m eager to see where she goes from here.

Jessica Parker Kennedy plays Max, a prostitute turned information broker with more to gain and less to lose than Eleanor Guthrie. Entirely obvious of her status, her role, and the advantages she can bring to any table, Max progresses as a self-made powerhouse of empire building with her knowledge of the streets, and the power plays within them, carving a name and reputation for herself. She’s a strength amongst the cast and Jessica will be someone I’ll be following closely in the future.

Zach McGowan plays the first of our “historical” pirates, Charles Vane, like a simmering pot of violence and self-determination. With a voice like a gravel path and a cunning bad-boy image, Vane is one of the driving forces of the series in his mutual dislike of Captain Flint. Physically capable, dangerous and malevolent, Charles Vane broods his way through every scene and judging by his growing internet fan base, it’s easy to see he’s a fan favorite. I’d love to see a spin-off series set in his past!

Toby Schmitz plays “Calico” Jack Rackham, initially Quartermaster to Charles Vane. It’s interesting at this point to note Toby’s choice of portrayal- whether by direction, script or acting design, Jack Rackham is one of the many joys of this show. Every scene laced with irony, comic timing and subtle humor.

At this point, I’m going to make a comparison. It struck me watching Toby Schmitz that somewhere in the history books there was a template for how Jack Rackham was supposed to have behaved. It struck me that Disney (it’s common knowledge the lead character in their film series is based on the historical Jack Rackham) had added a heavy dose of individuality. With all due respect to Disney, and I don’t mind the film series, I found that the portrayal of their lead character fits the tone of the movies in humor, silliness, and the pantomime of acting. I’m a fan of the character and give every respect to the charitable use of the costume in the impromptu appearances of that actor at children’s hospital wards.

So returning to Black Sails, it then struck me that Toby Schmitz had taken that image, stripped away the pantomime behavior of the Disney character, and portrayed a realistic Jack Rackham worthy of the name. A dream role acted like a legend in every scene, Toby plays Rackham as the smartest man in the room. I enjoyed his rise through the series to someone disregarded in his ability to fight, to the fourth season and his aspirations to live up to a name while carving a legacy for himself.

You can’t mention Jack Rackham without Anne Bonny, and Clara Paget threw me with her portrayal. Any production meeting about the characters would be forgiven if they had created Anne Bonny to be a fiery redhead, a gorgeous babe in Pirates’ clothing, yar-harring with the men and slapping her thigh while providing the busty token fan service for the young men in the audience.

Instead, we get Clara Paget’s fantastic performance of a woman who growls, spits, glares, curses, and speaks her mind. Distrustful, damaged, conscious of the company she keeps and the legend she carved for herself as an enforcer for Vane, and very aware of her self-imposed position as Rackham’s sword arm. She’s a conflicted woman, entirely appreciated by Vane and Rackham for the skills she possesses. If Clara Paget turns up in anything in the future, I’m going to be interested!

In season 3, Luke Roberts emerges as Governor Woodes Rogers, the antagonist of the last two seasons. When I said there were no good guys or bad guys? Woodes Rogers is an understandable man given an impossible task, with the drive and dedication to pursue his ends while all too aware of the cost to his humanity. Luke excels in this role, bringing a subtlety and nuance that made me back the pirates, but equally, root for the Governor and feel for his situation. In my view, Luke Roberts has created an iconic antagonist that deserves to be recognized among the greatest TV “bad guys” of all time.

There are others: there are so many others, but I won’t go into them now. These are the stand-outs, although it’s unfair to single anyone as a stand-out in such a large and excellent cast.

So why did Black Sails succeed so well?

Occasionally, history throws up an era that forms a self-contained snapshot of life at that time. A period of history that has a start, middle, and after it ends, it’s gone. The Wild West, the American Gangster era of Prohibition America, the Viking years.

The Golden Age of Piracy is one such time period, and it’s awash with misconception and Hollywood stereotype.

Black Sails washes that away with a highly realistic portrayal of pirate life, possibly the most realistic to date. The costume and set departments had a field day, the fight choreography excelled, and the set designers created a beautiful palette of a run-down port like Nassau; with crumbling walls, peeling paintwork and sun-faded décor.

The ships deserve mention all of their own- lovingly recreated in period detail, (at least) two full-size ships were created to film each shipboard sequence. Beautifully used during all the set-piece chases, the storms, and the highly enjoyable boarding actions and ship to ship battles as cannon balls splinter masts, flying shrapnel in all directions.

The writing deserves a special mention. Storylines awash with plotting and intrigue provide the very best of character conflict, individual story arcs that lead to realistic development individually, and on existing characters’ relationships.

Black Sails presents the very best of high budget television department. First rate scripts, a stellar cast performing roles written with care and dedication, all backed up by the highest of production value.

The dialogue appears to be added post production, and that frees the show the accusations of modern mumbling. You can hear every word, and listening to the voices of Flint, Vane, Rackham and especially Silver seem like a voice acting masterclass. When they share the same scene, you’re treated to a ride better than any I’ve seen on television. Mehrabian created a rule that 7% of communication is verbal, 38% from the tone of voice and 55% from body language: the cast of Black Sails use all 100%. Pause, nuance, inflection, tone; it’s all here in spades.

Is it worth it? Is Black Sails worth investing thirty-eight episodes of your life? Absolutely. It isn’t for everyone. It may not be for you, but if you try it and find you can take the time to let a television show tell you the story in its own time, you might find yourself on an altogether unexpected ride where every plot twist, every scene, every emotion of these characters tells a fantastic story.

The final icing on the cake- how many times have you seen a television show finished early? How many times have you seen a show rise to a peak of audience figures, then it’s allowed through greed or mismanagement to run too far and begin to fade, lose audiences, change writing staff and finish on an unsatisfactory note? Black Sails announced its final season well in advance, and that gave the writing team the chance to finish the story properly.

Black Sails drops the anchor after four breathtaking seasons in a way that ties all loose ends, and the finish rivals the finest meal: satisfactory, fulfilling, and leaving you with an aftertaste to be long remembered.