



## MEMBER PICKS

# The Life of Pi

### The Life of Pi

Directed by: Ang Lee

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Production Company: Haishang Films

Produced in association with: Big Screen

Productions, Ingenious Film Partners

With the participation of: Province of British

Columbia Production Services Tax Credit

Presented by: Fox 2000 Pictures

Executive Producer: Dean Georgaris

Produced by: Gil Netter, Ang Lee, David Womark

Co-producer: David Lee

Associate Producers: Michael J. Malone,

Kevin Buxbaum, Pravesh Sahni *India Unit*

Unit Production Managers: Michael Malone,

Sanjay Kumar *India Unit*

Financial Controller: Kevin Buxbaum

Location Managers: Rajesh Dham,

Suzanne Laverdure, Adrian Knight

Post-production Supervisor: Steven Kaminsky

First Assistant Directors: William M. Connor,

Cliff Lanning

Script Supervisor: Mary Cybulski

Casting Associate: Leeba Zakharov

Screenplay by: David Magee

Based on the novel by: Yann Martel

Directors of Photography: Claudio Miranda,

Peter Zuccarini *Splinter Unit*

Additional Director of Photography:

John Schwartzman *Montreal Unit*

Camera Operator: Lukas Bielan

Gaffer: Eddy Maloney

Key Grip: Herb Ault

VFX Supervisor: Bill Westenhofer

VFX Producer: Susan MacLeod

Visual Effects by: Rhythm and Hues Studios

Additional Montage Sequences Designed by:

Hollywood yU+co, CA

Previsualization/Postvisualization by:

LLC Halon Entertainment

Additional Visual Effects Services by:

Look! Effects Inc, Inc. Christov Effects and Design,

Legend3D, Reliance Mediaworks

Replica and Animatronic Animals Created by:

Legacy Effects

Animation by: Rhythm and Hues Studios

Film Editor: Tim Squyres

VFX Editor: Catherine Chase

Production Designer: David Gropman

Supervising Art Director: Dan Webster

Art Director: Al Hobbs

Set Designers: Easton Smith, Sarah Contant,

Huei Chen, Huei-Li Liao

Set Designer (Los Angeles): James Hewitt

Set Decorator: Anna Pinnock

Illustrator: Joanna Bush

Inspirational/Tiger Vision Art: Alexis Rockman

Props Master: Robin L. Miller

Raft Concept/Design Artist: Haan Lee

Costume Designer: Arjun Bhasin

Hair and Makeup Designer: Fae Hammond

Main/End Title Sequences Designed by: yU+co.

End Titles: Hollywood yU+co, CA

Music by: Mychael Danna

Additional Music by: Rob Simonsen

Score Conducted by: Mike Nowak

Choreographer: Sheejith Krishna

Sound Designer: Eugene Gearty

Production Sound Mixer: Drew Kunin

Boom Operator: Mark Goodermote

Re-recording Mixers: Doug Hemphill, Ron Bartlett

### SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

It might be said that there are two kinds of Ang Lee film – the baroque athletic action-style titles and the ‘feast’ pictures. His latest *Life of Pi*, adapted from the Yann Martel novel that has sold more than 7 million copies, is a synthesis of these two models. It’s a feast, visually, and certainly more theologically inclined than his usual story landscapes. It revisits the hard-play bells-and-whistles dynamism of 2000’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (and whisper it softly, *Hulk*), but also recalls feast films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), although in this case the feast is starvation and the chef is the villain. Those feast films also have their sense of burdens to be borne and individuality to be gained, often at the expense of the family unit or a patriarch. It’s not wholly surprising to find a tiger (imagination, power, concealment) associated with one of Lee’s films once more, though this time it’s a tiger who comes to 3D.

*Life of Pi* is the story of an Indian boy named Piscine Molitor Patel, shortened to Pi. He grows up in the former French colony of Pondicherry, where his father runs a small zoo in the city’s botanical gardens. Young Pi is eccentric and deeply interested in religion, at various stages trying out Christianity and Islam alongside his native Hinduism, to the exasperation of his Francophile father, who worships the glories and atheistic freedoms of the Enlightenment. For reasons that are never wholly explained in the film (social unrest is hinted at off screen in its 1977 time-frame), Mr Patel decides to emigrate to Canada, taking his family and exotic zoo animals with him. The Japanese cargo ship on which they sail sinks in a terrible storm, and Pi finds himself adrift on the ocean in a lifeboat, with a ferocious tiger for company.

Much of the film is imbued with a sense of drifting slow starvation, shot through with bolts of panic as the boy has to cope with an aggressive and hungry predator waiting for him to falter for a second. As the days go by, events become increasingly hallucinogenic, including a visit to a floating island, which turns out to be carnivorous, eating the unwary at night. The ordeal is very much presented as a spiritual progression, with Pi overcoming his fears and taming the tiger, though in his darkest moments crying out to God like a mystic in the desert.

Echoing the hyper-real and hyper-cultural constructs of the story, the technical effects don’t have the vaudevillian quality of most 3D films. Great care, for example, is given to a cobweb in the mid-ground. One of the effects Lee most seems to love is the swimming human body, suspended in a kind of aquatic swoon. Swimming seems to be a form of flying, of exultation. In early shots we see Pi’s father enjoying a swim in Paris so much that he names his son after the pool – Piscine. Later Pi watches underwater as the ship goes down or animals swim, and on another occasion he falls from his boat and enters a liquid world as phantasmagorical as anything from Miyazaki Hayao. The glossy reflections of water and light on water, of luminescence, are constant refrains. Whereas some directors would use the effects to create a visual version of the sustain pedal, Lee’s effects are somehow refreshing, a sherbet served by hours.

But he’s capable of old-time, literal grandiosity as well. In a spirit of fidelity to Martel’s vision of the zoo in Pondicherry, for example, Lee went to the trouble of shooting on location in the region after adapting the local botanical gardens.

Ang Lee is well known for his love of food, and his earlier films *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* revolve around this idea. When he goes on shoots, he is known to make and freeze two months’ worth of meals for his microbiologist wife. So it’s interesting that the secret villain of *Life of Pi* is a chef, played with some relish by Gérard Depardieu, with all the girth and reduced sauces and potential triple-bypasses that involves. I say secret villain because, well, it’s complicated, but the narrative structure of the film involves Pi telling the story to a ‘writer’ in his Canadian home, and at the very end Pi tells a second version of the

Recordists: Tim Gomillion, Dennis Rogers  
 Supervising Sound Editors: Eugene Gearty, Philip Stockton  
 Dialogue Editor: Philip Stockton  
 Sound Effects Recordist: John Fasal  
 Sound Effects Editor: John Morris  
 Survival/Marine Consultant: Steve Callahan  
 Stunt Coordinator: Charlie Croughwell  
 Tiger Trainer/Consultant: Thierry Le Portier  
 Animal Coordinator: Paul 'Sled' Reynolds  
 Cast:  
 Suraj Sharma (*Pi Patel*)  
 Irrfan Khan (*adult Pi Patel*)  
 Tabu (*Gita Patel*)  
 Rafe Spall (*writer*)  
 Gérard Depardieu (*cook*)  
 Ayush Tandon (*Pi Patel aged 11/12 years*)  
 Gautam Belur (*Pi Patel aged 5 years*)  
 Adil Hussain (*Santosh Patel*)  
 Ayaan Khan (*Ravi Patel aged 7 years*)  
 Mohd. Abbas Khaleeli (*Ravi Patel aged 13/14 years*)  
 Vibish Sivakumar (*Ravi Patel aged 18/19 years*)  
 James Saito (*older insurance investigator*)  
 Jun Naito (*younger insurance investigator*)  
 Andrea Di Stefano (*priest*)  
 Shravanthi Sainath (*Anandi*)  
 Elie Alouf (*Mamaji*)  
 Padmini Ramachandran (*dance master*)  
 TM Karthik (*science teacher*)  
 Amarendran Ramanan (*Indian history teacher*)  
 Hari Mina Bala (*librarian*)  
 Wang Bo-Chieh (*Buddhist sailor*)  
 Ravi Natesan (*Selvam*)  
 Adyant Balaji, Chirag Agarwal, Ahan André Kamath, Om Kamath, Srilekh Katta (*bullies*)  
 Swati Van Rijswijk (*Anandi's friend #1*)  
 M. Keerthana (*Anandi's friend #2*)  
 Indumohan Poornima, Josephine Nithya, S. Samyuktha, A. Deiva Sundari, G. Vasantakumary, A. Vithya (*dancers*)  
 Mythili Prakash (*Pi's wife*)  
 Raj Patel (*Pi's son*)  
 Hadiqa Hamid (*Pi's daughter*)  
 Iswar Srikumar (*Muslim worshipper*)  
 Ganesh Keshav (*Pi Patel aged 11/12 years stand-in*)  
 Ko Yi-Cheng (*Tsimtsum Captain*)  
 Huang Jian-Wei (*sailor*)  
 USA 2012  
 127 mins  
 Digital

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same shipwreck events that revolves around the chef in a tale of unutterable horror and human delinquency on the high seas.

There is a touch of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moby Dick* to this tale, both in the book and film versions. There's even a touch of Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête*, with its entry into a magical world and a supping with monsters. The tale of the sailor, the shipwreck and the castaway has very deep roots in Western literature, and it's a narrative difficult to relay as a film because – as, say, in Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away* (2000) – slow starvation isn't pretty to watch. There's also an immediate dramatic problem with the lack of people to interact with. But newcomer Suraj Sharma, a junior black belt in karate, is compelling in the title role, giving added authenticity by losing weight during the filming process. (The *Cast Away* production had gone even further, stopping filming to allow Tom Hanks the time to become emaciated.) And the visual representation of his reality – are the tiger, orangutan, zebra and hyena in the lifeboat even really there? – has an unexpected muscularity and heft, unlike those films in which the inner life of a character is presented on screen like an eruption of coloured balloons (*Amelie*, for example).

'The tiger is not your friend,' thunders Mr Patel to his son when he gets himself into a dangerous situation at the zoo. 'Animals don't think like we do; people who forget that get themselves killed.' *Life of Pi's* visual-effects supervisor Bill Westenhofer worked on the lion in *The Lion*, the *Witch* and the *Wardrobe* and it's to his credit that the tiger never feels anthropomorphised. Working with the animal trainer from *Gladiator*, Thierry Le Portier, Westenhofer sourced his movements from three tigers in France and one in Canada. A moveable boat was even set up in a tiger enclosure to capture some scenes.

The tiger in the story is called Richard Parker – a fact explained in the film's narration by a mix-up when the animal was delivered to the zoo, which inadvertently switched the name of the hunter and the tiger, who had originally been named Thirsty. But one senses, correctly, that there's even more to this name than meets the eye. In fact, Richard Parker is also the name of a mutinous sailor in the Edgar Allan Poe novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, published in 1838. He owned a dog called 'Tiger'. The name also has strong associations with cannibalism at sea, of the kind well documented in A.W. Brian Simpson's book *Cannibalism and the Common Law*, which goes into great detail about a cabin boy eaten by his crew-mates Dudley and Stevens when the ship *Mignonette* sank in 1884. The boy's name, by coincidence, was Richard Parker. As a result of their cannibalism, the law in Great Britain, and subsequently the high seas, was changed to make such feastings illegal – extraordinarily, they had not been previously.

Look long and hard at Gérard Depardieu in the one scene where he appears – as a contemptuous and greasy chef refusing to serve vegetarians in the bowels of the ship *Tsimtsum*, whose very name evokes the steam of Cantonese cuisine. In the story within the story within the story of this film, he is the hyena who is the real threat to the life of the Indian boy, a man quite capable of eating human flesh to stay alive in the days and weeks adrift at sea. The tiger is Pi all along, his yang energy, his viagra (the Sanskrit word for tiger).

Lee must recognise aspects of himself in Pi, his childhood spent travelling with his parents between East and West, never quite fitting in to either zone. It's a film about baggage and cargo, about the horror of the world expressed by a dream. But it's primarily a story about storytelling itself, a position flagged up initially as a man (the 'writer', played by Rafe Spall) sits down with another man (the adult Pi), many years after the event. Pi tells the same story he has already told the Japanese insurers after his eventual salvation; but then, after pressure, he retells the 'real' version of what happened. 'Which story do you prefer?' Pi asks.

And then his wife and children arrive at the door of his Canadian home, and all is happiness and domesticity. 'Do you want to stay for dinner?' Pi asks the writer. 'She's a very good cook.'

Roger Clarke, *Sight and Sound*, January 2013