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REVIEW / Film

Knight Lite: Crusaders Lose Again... to a Weak Script In Gory 'Kingdom of Heaven'

Bloom Lacks Gravity in Lead Role
But Neeson, Irons Soldier On;
A Flawed, Fascinating 'Crash'

—By JOANNE KAUFMANN—

THE CRUSADES LASTED, what, 150, 175 years? Ridley Scott's self-important new sand and swords epic "Kingdom of Heaven," set in 12th-century Jerusalem and environs, feels exactly as long as those Holy Land holy wars—even if it isn't nearly as much fun.

Orlando Bloom is Balian, a French blacksmith who's lost his faith since losing his beloved wife and infant son. The Lord, however, works in mysterious ways. The father Balian never knew, God-

frey of Ibelin, (Liam Neeson), a knight of great renown and even greater swordsmanship, has returned briefly to France from the east. He sees great things in his illegitimate son, perhaps because of the legend engraved on one of the beams of the smithy: "What man is a man who does not make the world better?" Initially, Balian is none too sure that father knows best, and declines the offer to join the Crusades; subsequent



Orlando Bloom

events make him decide that getting out of town isn't the worst idea in the known world. But can he measure up? Can he truly be the parit gentil knight of Godfrey's yearning? Even if it means risking the loss of the woman he grows to love? Ibelin lays it right on the line: "My son: You are all that survives me. Don't disappoint me."

Set during the reigns of the enlightened Christian king Baldwin IV (Edward Norton), and the restrained Muslim leader Saladin (Ghassan Massoud), "Kingdom of Heaven" is essentially a series of battles punctuated by the sort of dialogue that was none too fresh when Cecil B. DeMille was in the epic business. "What becomes of us?" Balian's inamorata Sibylla (Eva Green) asks him at one point. "The world decides," comes the reply.

But every one of those battles, whether in the woods of France or the deserts of the Sinai peninsula—now slow motion, now real time—looks numbingly like the dust-up just before. While there's gore by the gallon, inventiveness is in short supply. And the movie's one brief foraging with delicacy—King Baldwin's wearing of a striking silver mask to hide the depredations of leprosy—lasts about as long as a Middle East truce.

It's tricky enough for the most skilled actors to sound natural when saddled with the artificial chat so beloved by writers of historical dramas. Mr. Neeson and Jeremy Irons, as the humanistic adviser to Baldwin, are eminently up to the task (the former departs the proceedings early, and one can sympathize). But Mr. Bloom, on whose shoulders "Kingdom of Heaven" rests, leaves rather a lot to be desired. He lacks the specific gravity that would make him convincing as a leader of men; it's a wearisome thing just to watch him try.

'Crash'

WHO WOULD HAVE ever thought Los Angeles was such a small town? In the engrossing, flawed "Crash," a couple of cops have so many run-ins with the same two citizens over such a short span of time, the City of Angels begins to seem exactly like Mayberry.

It's a few days before Christmas, the mercury is Please Turn to Page W7



To Have and to Hit Up

With weddings ever pricier, couples are asking invitees to pay for everything from manicures to deejays. Jennifer Saranow on the new business of dunning guests—and who's saying 'I don't.'

GUESTS INVITED to the wedding of Wesley Puryear and Valerie Hernandez will be treated to a \$51,000 nuptial extravaganza, with a serenading string quartet, a cigar expert dressed in Cuban garb to roll stogies and a blazing Venetian dessert. But all that luxury is the least the guests can expect. Some of them will have paid for these lavish extras themselves—to the tune of \$150 a head. That's how much the future Mr. and Mrs. Puryear hope to collect from their deeper-pocketed invitees to pay for the August wedding in New York.

"It's like wedding education for guests," says Mr. Puryear, a 25-year-old bond trader who plans to foot more than half the total bill himself. "They need to understand the cost."

It's getting cheaper to be the parents of the bride—and more expensive to be a guest. In a new twist on wedding economics, brides and grooms are starting to use services that ask invitees to pay for everything from the

bridal manicure to the officiant's fee. In most cases, the requests are on top of traditional gifts like bedsheets, but they can also be the only option offered to guests. A photo studio in Glastonbury, Conn., allows couples to rope in guests to pay for photography services. When Bridal Blooms & Creations handles a wedding, the Richardson, Texas, florist encourages clients to solicit guests for payment—and lets invitees call in or e-mail to make purchases. As part of its promotion for a new money-transfer service, Wells Fargo & Co. is encouraging couples to set up "wedding accounts" where guests can make deposits.

"This is just a 21st-century way" of giving wedding presents, says Stephanie Smith, a senior vice president of Wells Fargo Online.

Given the spiraling costs of getting hitched, couples say they have little choice but to turn to their guests. An average wedding in the New York area costs about \$38,000, up 21% since 1999, (Please Turn to Page W3)

Plus

Pass the lamb: Our guide to what's in and what's out at ceremonies.

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Catalog Critic



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS CHALKIN

WEDDINGS

To Have and to Hit Up



Style Watch

To find out the current trends in wedding style, we talked to wedding planners, musicians and merchants around the country. Here are a few examples of what they say is in—and out—for the upcoming nuptial season.

BRIDAL AND GROOM PARTY WEDDING FAVORS

IN: Mini iPods or iPod accessories
OUT: Anything engraved

"Everyone seems to have an iPod or to want one," says Brooklyn, N.Y., wedding planner Soraya Jollon.

FIRST DANCE SONG

IN: "I I Ain't Got You," Alicia Keys
OUT: "At Last," Etta James

Turn Tuttle, a deejay in Cape Cod, Mass., says Ms. Keys's music "really satisfies the appetite of somebody who wants the more hip-hop rhythm."

CENTERPIECE

IN: Vignettes of different-size-and-shape flower containers
OUT: Large, single centerpieces, candelabras and tall glass vases

New York wedding planner Preston Bailey says he's creating more sculptural looks, like a single large rose, and highlighting the arrangement with a spotlight.

MAIN ENTRÉE

IN: Lamb chops
OUT: Miso-glazed cod
Lamb chops are making a comeback because they can be presented in so many ways and spiced to reflect different ethnic backgrounds.

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according to Fairchild Bridal Group, a division of Fairchild Publications. Some point to cultures where honored guests pitch in to pay for wedding expenses; others cite the recent spate of highly publicized ceremonies in which brides and grooms had their weddings funded in part by companies in exchange for publicity. And then there's the growing number of late-marriers, who say they've already accumulated a lifetime supply of dishes and toasters.

In Michele Reneau's case, asking guests to pay for parts of her beach wedding last fall on the Isle of Palms, S.C., was a matter of practicality. She needed \$2,500 to help pay for basics, so she posted requests on her online registry (Sample: 15 gifts of \$50 for wedding catering; 20 gifts of \$50 for photography). The 27-year-old real-estate broker happily took in more than \$3,000. She also got some traditional gifts, like crystal, that she didn't want. The unasked-for items "probably won't ever get used," says Ms. Reneau.

The new services are a way of formalizing—and making public—a practice that many brides and grooms formerly did rather qui-

etly: return gifts for cash to help defray the costs of the ceremony and reception. It's also the latest step in the evolution of bridal registries. Traditionally, of course, guests had to drag themselves to an actual store to pick gifts off a list. (The rule of thumb was that the present or cash gift should roughly equal the price of the guest's wedding dinner.) Then online registries took off with the Internet boom, with some sites allowing guests to contribute to a general fund for things like mortgages.

'Inexcusably Rude'

But specifying outright which elements of the ceremony you want your guests to fund is another matter—and strikes some wedding-industry experts as questionable. Peggy Post, who writes about etiquette, calls asking guests to pay for elements of the ceremony and party "inexcusably rude," while bridal consultant Frank Andonoplas in Chicago, says there can be financial issues. "I would never in a million years recommend this," says Mr. Andonoplas, whose weddings range from \$75,000 to \$250,000. "You'd wind up in debt."

Or almost as bad: causing some awkwardness for relatives. When her little sister started planning her

A Little Help From Your Guests

With weddings more extravagant than ever, brides and grooms are increasingly asking their guests to kick in for everything from the flowers to the minister's fee. Here are some Web sites where couples can register for wedding help.

SITE	REGISTER FOR	FEE	COMMENTS
aperfectweddinggift.com	Cash "towards home, wedding or honeymoon"	7% of money collected	The money is wired to the couple's PayPal account on the day of their wedding, though the site says some couples ask for funds beforehand. There were 540 new registrants in 2004, up more than 100% from 2003.
Bridal Blooms & Creations bridalblossoms.com	Hand-tied bouquets and centerpiece flowers	Free	The Richardson, Texas, shop charges about \$2,500 to \$3,000 for bridal flowers. Guests can call and e-mail in information for purchases.
TheHoneymoon.com	Elements of honeymoons and destination weddings	Guests are charged 6% to 9%	Based in Minneapolis, the site is free to the bride and groom. According to the owner, new clients are asking guests to chip in for a variety of services, including the fee for a priest or rabbi.
JM Images & Design jimimages.com	Wedding portraits and albums	Free	This San Diego-based photography site gives clients a 10% bonus for every purchase made by a guest. A \$100 gift, for example, gives the client a \$110 credit with JM.
RegistryPalace.com	Specific elements of your wedding or honeymoon	One month free, then \$9 a month	The founder of this Los Angeles site set it up to collect funds for his own wedding last February. Among his requests: two \$150 round-trip tickets to Vegas. There are about 40 accounts currently.
Sandals Resorts registry WeddingChannel.com	Honeymoon costs	Guests pay fee of about 4%	The registry for the Sandals chain of beach resorts is part of WeddingChannel.com. Starting next year, Sandals plans to let couples register for elements of weddings designed by consultant Preston Bailey.

wedding a couple of years ago, 38-year-old Claire Potter didn't even focus on what to give. And then she didn't have to, because 10 months before the big day, the bride posted a request on her personal Web site asking guests to contribute to a wedding-funding site. Though Ms. Potter realized a formal Scottish affair (staged in a Victorian mansion in San Francisco, with a wedding gown created by a film costume designer), would be pricey, she was still put off. "I thought it was a little tacky—just the idea of it," says the Novato, Calif., teacher. (Ms. Potter's sister, Cynthia Decker, says she expected that reaction, but figured guests would come around eventually.) In the end, Ms. Potter ended up giving Ms. Decker \$200.

For entrepreneurs, creating a registry where the bride and groom can solicit guests for specific items is a way of grabbing a slice of the growing \$125 billion wedding industry. Aperfectweddinggift.com, charges couples 7% of the money it collects and deposits in a couple's account on PayPal, the service consumers use to send and receive payments over the Web. The wedding site, which recommends couples use the money "towards home, wedding or honeymoon," says it has registered about 1,100 couples to date, up from fewer than 300 in 2003.

RegistryPalace.com, which launched last year, operates on a similar model, but charges couples a flat \$9 fee after a month, then allows the betrothed couple to make specific monetary requests: Current ones include a \$1,200 wedding cake, \$450 for favors and a \$250 pastor.

Sites sponsored by specific mer-

chants, like florists or photographers, tend not to charge for the registry services, but treat them as an extra that will set them apart from competitors. Owners also say that pay-for-my-wedding registries are good for business, because they allow couples to spend more than they could otherwise afford. "I'm constantly looking for ways to fine-tune so the client's money goes further," says Jennifer Watson, a San Diego photographer who says about 60% of her clients use her registry.

Not all guests comply with the requests, as Carrie Draghi found out last July. The 31-year-old was hoping to get friends and family to foot her approximately \$4,000 photography bill. So she had her bridesmaids slip information into shower invitations asking guests to consult a registry with her photographer, Brian Ambrose. About six of 300 guests did so, for a total of about \$600.

Parking Pylons Needed

For Laura Ricci, a 50-year-old management consultant in Milwaukee whose second marriage is coming up May 14, a registry was a way to enlist friends to fill in for pricey photographers and florists. She posted requests on her nuptial Web site for a "flower tender" to water and deliver 12 tabletop arrangements; a "dance helper" to help set up the hall the night of the reception; two parking attendants and someone to provide the parking pylons. "What we're really suffering from is not enough help for the ceremony," says Ms. Ricci.

One of the first sites to test out the guests' chipping-in concept was TheKnot.

com, a wedding resource site, which launched a "create-a-gift" program in 1998. That service allowed couples to specify what they wanted to receive and to ask guests for American Express Gift Cheques in increments of \$50 to pay for the items. At the same time, sites like HoneyLuna.com started allowing couples to solicit contributions for elements of honeymoons.

But with nearly one-third of weddings this year being paid solely by the bride and groom, up from one-quarter in 2004, according to Fairchild, the get-your-guest-to-contribute model is catching on. Often, the setup is just a sop to guests. Over one-third of Colorado photographer Wendy Saunders's clients, for example, now use a registry that allows guests to designate which aspect of Ms. Saunders's services they want to fund. In reality, the engaged couple get a lump sum to spend as they see fit. "Guests like the idea of a gift versus a financial donation," says Ms. Saunders.

In fact, couples feel they have to be creative about the solicitations. Bond trader Mr. Puryear says he won't be hitting some people up at all: For out-of-town friends he believes make less than \$40,000, his invitations will include information about standard gift registries. For others, he's encouraging monetary gifts by sending "subliminal" messages, telling friends how expensive the wedding will be. If they ask him about a traditional registry, he says he'll change the subject.

Guest Candice Nelson, a 23-year-old co-worker of Mr. Puryear's fiancée, says she has no issue with essentially paying her way. "I'll support my friends whatever they want to do."