

Cruise has still got it

by Emma Brockes

- 1 Before going to the movies this week to see *Top Gun: Maverick*, I hadn't thought about Tom Cruise for a while. Or rather, I hadn't thought about him in his capacity as a movie star. Cruise's reputation has ranged over the years from hero to villain to general curiosity. At nearly 60, one might imagine he's done. Instead, here he is, skin stretched taut by forces greater than G-force, at the helm of a \$170m action movie that broke US box office records on its opening weekend. We've been through a lot with Cruise, but I'm going to say it: he's the last great movie star and this film, coming at a dismal moment in history, is close to being the perfect distraction.
- 2 The original *Top Gun* was released in 1986 and the makers of the sequel have shrewdly leaned into the nostalgia, updating the fighter jets and crew, but soaking every other detail in references to the original. It's all there, from the opening words on-screen, to the jump-jets landing on the carrier, to the tight white T-shirts and aviator shades. Because of all this, and the thrill of watching F-18s fight over unnamed enemy territory, *Top Gun: Maverick* hit \$160m at the US box office on its opening weekend, with the smallest drop ever – 29% – to \$90m for the second weekend.
- 3 A lot of this has to do with Cruise himself. His persistent strangeness off-screen has made it easy to forget just how good he is on-screen. Cruise has decent acting chops, but it's not that. It's the smile, obviously, which he rations so severely every flash of it lights up the scene. It's the nose. It's the eyebrows. It's that weird clenching thing he does with his jaw. It's the sheer distance between him and his co-stars, in this case Jon Hamm, a prissy creature of the small screen who looks thoroughly out of place in a blockbuster. Only Val Kilmer can hold his own opposite Cruise in this movie.
- 4 There are other films, other movie stars, but it's never quite the same. Brad Pitt – look, we all loved him back in the day, but he's become incrementally seedier and less appealing over the years, and not just for his behaviour towards Angelina Jolie. George Clooney? Too urbane. There's not enough mystery about Clooney and that charm of his has



curdled over the years into a self-regard so solid it's practically Clintonian. I recall seeing him at a press launch years ago, surrounded by acolytes, radiating what can only be called yes-I'd-be-excited-to-meet-me-too energy. There are younger contenders, too, all hobbled by various limitations. Chris Hemsworth, like Jason Momoa, looks like a boulder person from *Frozen 2*, who one imagines being broken by any question larger than "tea or coffee?".

- 5 So, to Cruise. I know, his adherence to Scientology. I used to fuss about that, but these days couldn't care less. At this distance, it almost 11. Cruise is consistently odd, thoroughly unknowable. He rarely posts on socials. He won't do a TV show. He fought to have the release of *Top Gun: Maverick* limited to cinemas rather than, as per industry standards, shared with a streaming giant.
- 6 The movie's one downside is the absence of Kelly McGillis, who, though only five years older than Cruise, is still a woman, so as per Hollywood bylaws isn't permitted within 100 feet of a romantic role in a blockbuster (Jennifer Connelly plays the love interest). In an interview with *Entertainment Tonight* recently, McGillis said: "I'm old and I'm fat and I look age-appropriate for what my age is, and that is not what that whole scene is about." Quite.
- 7 Still, I loved it. Here was the excitement America has for itself in its most innocent form. Killjoys will say it fetishises the military, and you can do that, if that's what you do. It is also joyous, and silly, and thrilling, and triumphant, a movie you have to submit to on its own terms or go home. "Well?" said a friend who I phoned immediately on leaving the cinema. "Greatest country on Earth," I said.

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