



SKY CAPTAIN & THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow might be the movie year's most refreshing surprise, especially when you consider how disastrous the results *could* have been.

The film, written and directed by debuting helmer Kerry Conran, is a '30s-era, serialized adventure saga à la Flash Gordon or Buck Rogers, wherein Sky (Jude Law), an intrepid, heroic aviator, attempts to (a) solve the mystery behind the disappearances of six noted scientists, (b) save America from the onslaught of enormous, marauding robots, and (c) get through these crises without being hen-pecked to death by the smart, snippy newshound Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow), his former love and traveling companion. Deliberately old-fashioned and cornball in its storytelling, the film is content to tell its tale with a (mostly) straight face; like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

Sky Captain

presents its action scenes and cliffhangers with only the merest hint of irony (which, to its box-office detriment, might make the movie play less well with the youth market than it will with older crowds).

But the film's plotting matters less than its design, which has been influenced more by *The Matrix*

than its '30s-era forebears. Law, Paltrow, and the movie's other humans walk among sets and landscapes that are entirely computer-generated; viewing the film is akin to flipping through a series of digitally-restored photographs that are yellowing with age. With its combination of sci-fi sleekness and depression-era drabness, the movie certainly looks like no other, yet oddly enough, it's

Sky Captain

's design that is the movie's weakest element. It's not that the look of the film isn't often wondrous. The first 15 minutes – which feature the sight of the Hindenburg III reaching its destination atop the Empire State Building and robots the size of King Kong trampling through Manhattan – are quite thrilling, and all throughout

Sky Captain

"Sky Captain" Brings Surprise and Fun: "Sky Captain & the World of Tomorrow" and "Cellular"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 21 September 2004 18:00

are sights to treasure, like the Asian Shangri-La that Sky and Polly miraculously find themselves in. But the film has a monochromatic color palette that tends to make every new scene look similar to the one that preceded it, and the effect is a little wearying; with its endless variations on sepia and steel-gray,

Sky Captain

, despite its tempo, doesn't have the vibrancy you want, and you can occasionally feel your eyelids getting droopy even while you're enjoying the film.

If the movie were nothing but an experiment in state-of-the-art computer design, however, there wouldn't be much to enjoy, which is why the talents of Conran and the cast are so welcome. Conran has managed to create a very believable comic-book universe in which a group of beloved stock figures – Polly's hard-nosed editor (Michael Gambon), a Dr. Moreau-ish mad scientist, a sexy British air commander (Angelina Jolie, with far less screen time than the film's trailers indicate) – mingle with ease, and his staging and pacing are terrific; his accomplishment is one of the more impressive directorial debuts of the past several years. This young writer-director was also incredibly fortunate to have Law and Paltrow as his stars, as they are two of the very few modern actors who don't seem the least bit uncomfortable with a period-performance style. Though neither character has been written with enough personality to make them truly memorable, Law and Paltrow deliver their dueling-tough-guy dialogue with supreme confidence and effectiveness;

Sky Captain is one of the rare adventure movies in which the leads' banter is actually

more entertaining than the action set pieces the characters are involved in.

Best of all, the movie is gloriously witty throughout; you have to love a work that casts a young Laurence Olivier, who passed away in 1989, as a man who's been dead for 20 years. (The use of Olivier's visage has none of the Fred-Astaire-dancing-with-a-vacuum creepiness you might expect.) In scene after scene, there's a throwaway bit of business or surprising line of dialogue that gives the onscreen actions an extra pop; I'll not soon forget the sight of Polly intentionally tearing the hem of her skirt so she can run just a *little* faster in high heels, or Giovanni Ribisi's adorable scientist uttering "Shazam!" upon seeing his first skyscraper-sized robot, or Law and Paltrow waking up in Shangri-La next to an unexpected guest. And even when you're absolutely certain about how a particular subplot will wrap up, as you are with the running gag about Polly having only two shots left in her camera, Conran throws in a comic fillip to give the scene extra zest; the movie doesn't just end with a joke, which is rare (and marvelous) enough, but with a

two-word

joke that sends the audience home giggly and refreshed. (At the screening I attended, people actually

applauded

the movie's curtain-closing line.)

Sky Captain & The World of Tomorrow is wonderful fun.



CELLULAR

The thriller *Cellular* has been getting some pretty good press and word-of-mouth, and it isn't bad, but you have to wonder if this positive energy hasn't been generating more for what the movie *isn't* than for what it is. Over the past several weeks, audiences have been *Exorcist*-ed and *Suspect Zero*-ed and *Anaconda*-ed to death; one lackluster thriller has been opening right after the other, and they've all been so laboriously and ridiculously solemn (or, in the case of

Anacondas

, just so laborious and ridiculous) that the wait at the cineplex's concession line has proven more exciting than the films themselves.

Cellular

, at least, has the good sense to

move

; we're hardly out of the opening credits when our heroine (Kim Basinger) finds herself kidnapped, and within 15 minutes, our hero (Chris Evans) is racing through the streets of L.A. trying to find her before his cell's battery dies. Nothing in the film really makes a lick of sense, particularly when Ms. Basinger is McGyver-ing a smashed phone into a workable communication device, and Chris Evans is a truly lunkheaded hero, all Tom Cruise-esque posturings and glib nonchalance. (Evans' "talents" would best be employed as a supporting player on a young-adult drama for the WB.) Yet a lot of people seem to really like the movie nonetheless, and it's pretty easy to see why – the film puts its simple, straightforward premise out there right away and just runs with it, plot lapses be damned;

Cellular

is like a slightly dumbed-down

Speed

, which is far preferable to a

really

dumbed-down

Anaconda

s. For those viewers for whom this

still

doesn't qualify as a great time, it should be said that Basinger gives an intense, touching

"Sky Captain" Brings Surprise and Fun: "Sky Captain & the World of Tomorrow" and "Cellular"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 21 September 2004 18:00

performance – her natural tremulousness, which often hinders her in leading roles, is used quite advantageously here – and the movie is over before you know it; you can quibble about plot inconsistencies on the drive home, but you won't much notice them in the theater. Plus,

Cellular

puts William H. Macy in the traditional Bruce Willis role, and how often in life will you get to see *that*

?