Written by Mike Schulz
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FLIGHTPLAN

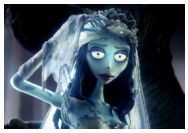
Movies such as *Flightplan* are hell to review. How do I explain, exactly, why the film doesn't work without giving away the plot secrets that *prevent* it from working? Like last fall's already-forgotten *The Forgotten,* director Robert Schwentke's airborne thriller involves a missing child. During a trans-Atlantic flight from Berlin to America, Jodie Foster's newly widowed Kyle lays her six-year-old daughter Julia (Marlene Lawston) down for a nap, falls asleep herself, and wakes to find the girl missing. Obviously, escape from the plane is impossible, but Julia is nowhere to be found, and, more disturbingly, no one on the flight seems to remember her being aboard. Could Julia have merely been a figment of Kyle's imbalanced imagination?

With Jodie Foster in the role, the answer is "probably not," and this isn't meant to disparage Foster's performance in the slightest; this performer elicits such remarkable empathy that making her character deluded with grief would, for an audience, be almost too cruel. Has any actress ever played mothers with the force and passion of Jodie Foster? In the movie's opening, Foster's Kyle caresses her daughter's cheek while the child sleeps, and it might be the most effective dramatic sequence in all of *Flightplan*. Foster, here, has thought out Kyle so deeply, and is dramatizing her connection with Julia with such fervor, that the scene tells you everything you need to know about Kyle's mental state and the bond with her daughter; both Kyle's despair at losing her husband and her love for her child are palpably felt, and the film's early scenes, after Julia has gone missing, are wrenching. *Flightplan* is designed to be an audience-pleasing good time, but Foster is playing it absolutely real – *too* real, it turns out, for the cheesy plot machinations and lapses in logic that follow. Foster's committed performance hints that the movie will be tougher, more deeply frightening, than it ever is.

Much of *Flightplan* is first-rate. The film's two-tiered jumbo jet is a miracle of design – so many places to hide – and Schwentke induces casual goosebumps with his gliding camera and clever composition; for a movie set aboard a plane, *Flightplan* isn't visually suffocating. Erika Christensen is just right as a sympathetic flight attendant, and your interest certainly perks up when you realize that Peter Sarsgaard and Sean Bean will be joining Foster

on the flight; much of the film's mystery lies in trying to guess just which of these two shady characters will wind up as the movie's bigger bastard.

And, to be fair, the big Plot Twist in the final reels is one that audience members probably won't see coming, but that's because no one *could* see it coming, as it involves a series of coincidences and contrivances too labyrinthine to describe. (Which makes me kind of *glad* that I'm not supposed to write about them.) As with many thrillers – including *The Forgotten* – once *Flightplan* starts going downhill the trajectory is unstoppable. By movie's end, the power of its opening has completely given way to dopey dialogue and the infuriating, predictable staples of its genre – anyone up for another round of The Monologuing Killer? – and Foster's heartfelt performance has been swallowed whole. The portions of *Flightplan* I'm allowed to discuss are generally effective; it's the *surprises* that make it a drag.



TIM BURTON'S CORPSE BRIDE

Tim Burton's Corpse Bride, like the producer's *Nightmare Before Christmas* and *James & the Giant Peach*, employs stop-motion animation to witty, delightful effect, but it doesn't have much personality; this might be perfectly appropriate for a tale of the undead, but once you've taken in the movie's ravishing visuals, there's not much else to sustain your interest. Johnny Depp provides the voice of Victor, a young, bashful bachelor of the Victorian era who finds himself, much to his shock, inadvertently married to a decaying corpse, yet despite a cheeky spirit, the movie is too much like the Corpse Bride herself: friendly, only a little creepy, and sadly lifeless.

Good ideas pop up throughout *Corpse Bride* – I loved the idea of a maggot acting as the literal voice in the Bride's head – and good lines, too, as when an elderly priest, beautifully voiced by Christopher Lee, intones to Depp's *human* fiancée, "You should be at home, prostrate with grief!" (The voice-over cast includes Helena Bonham-Carter, Emily Watson, Richard E. Grant, and a funny, growling Albert Finney.) Yet the movie is never as touching or macabre as Burton's sick-sweet temperament would suggest, and Danny Elfman's songs are a surprising blight on the fun – most of the lyrics come off as incoherent. About half of the movie is terrific, but since *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* runs a mere 75 minutes, that's less than 40 minutes of wonderful to enjoy; the film would have made for a sensational animated short.

JUST LIKE HEAVEN

I wish I could adequately explain why most formulaic romantic comedies bore me to tears and some, like *Just Like Heaven*, make me feel like giving them a big hug. Certainly, *Just Like Heaven* isn't any more *believable* than most feel-good Hollywood romances. Quite the opposite, in fact: With a quietly bereaved Mark Ruffalo bickering and falling gradually in love with the spirit of Reese Witherspoon – whose character might or might not have died in a car accident – suspension of disbelief is a prerequisite. The movie follows the traditional romantic-comedy blueprint to a T – complete with romantic obstacles, maudlin violins on the soundtrack, and a last-minute car chase wherein our hero finally decides to Get the Girl, Damn It – and a finale that ensures happy endings to all, logic and even basic sanity be damned. And I totally fell for it.

Director Mark Waters finds amusing ways to subvert our expectations – scenes that you assume will be unbearably mushy get turned inside out, and reveal themselves to be quite clever – and his pacing is sharp; I don't think there's a dull scene in the movie. The *de rigeur* comic support – chiefly Donal Logue, with his twinkling grin, and Jon Heder – is, in a refreshing change, allowed to not only drop punchlines but vary the film's tone in refreshing ways. (Yes, Heder does his

Napoleon Dynamite
thing, but it proves to be just the added dose of flakiness the movie needs). And the leads are marvelous together. Witherspoon is allowed to be more centered, and a good deal smarter, than she has in recent roles, and it suits her – she's effortlessly convincing as a young doctor – and Ruffalo's cuddly sadness plays off her pert electricity beautifully. Instead of seeming mismatched, the two leads prove ideal for one another – Ruffalo gives Witherspoon gravity, and she gives him speed and comedic confidence. (A scene of Ruffalo, with Witherspoon's spirit inhabiting him, attempting to down a cocktail against her will brings back happy memories of Steve Martin in
All of Me
.)
Just Like Heaven
is exactly the movie its trailers would lead you to think it is, and for once, that's a
good
thing.