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JARHEAD

In movies, nothing is harder to define than tone, and the tone of Sam Mendes' *Jarhead*, based on Tony Swofford's Gulf War memoir, is so elusive that, hours after it ends, you might still not know what to make of it. In many ways, the movie is like a two-hour expansion of *Full Metal Jacket* 's first 40 minutes, as the 20-year-old Swofford (Jake Gyllenhaal) and his fellow Marine recruits, pumped up to an almost insane degree, train for their mission in the unbearable desert heat and prepare for battle. In Mendes' film, however, there is no battle for his protagonists to respond to; the war ends while the Marines' bloodlust is still reaching a boil. The film is, in many ways, about the maddening banality of service, and it has resulted in an occasionally maddening movie, but its shifting tones and air of unpredictability make it impossible to shake off; at the finale, you might not know exactly what you've seen, but you certainly know you've seen *something.*

Mendes can't sustain the exquisite ambiguity and dread of Kubrick's work, but at times, he gets remarkably close – the film is a fascinating account of youthful American machismo gone feral. *Jarhead* is often the blackest of comedies, yet it has a simmering tension that cuts through the laughter – it's a rare war movie in which you nearly *pray* the soldiers will enter battle, if only to turn their ferocity against someone other than each other. The film, which features no traditional combat sequences, is an *emotionally* violent experience; you leave disoriented, and a little shaken. There are some bum scenes – a football sequence, with the recruits showing off for American cameras, feels especially off-the-mark – and it's sometimes underwritten to the point of abstraction, but its confused tenor actually works in *Jarhead* 's favor, and the movie has been brilliantly shot (by the peerless Roger Deakins) and composed; its images resemble a sun-baked nightmare.

The casting of Gyllenhaal is a conceptually risky choice that winds up working beautifully. In the

majority of military-themed works, the leading figure is portrayed by emotionally neutral actors – think Matthew Modine in *Full Metal Jacket*, or Martin and Charlie Sheen in *Apocalypse Now* and
Platoon
, respectively – who make for good audience surrogates, as we can read whatever thoughts or feelings we want in their close-to-the-vest portrayals. But Gyllenhaal is a ferociously honest screen presence. His wide, expressive eyes are the perfect contradiction to Swofford's animalistic physicality; he lets us see the frightened child beneath the potential madman, and makes explicit in Swofford's character emotions only hinted at in the script. It's a fantastic performance, and he's nearly matched by the riveting Peter Sarsgaard and Jamie Foxx, who gives his drill-sergeant routine a clever spin by delivering his often-predictable tirades with laid-back, almost throwaway authority.
Jarhead
is occasionally frustrating, and sometimes unsatisfying, but it's a strong, tonally adventurous experiment, and it feels unlike any film of its type I've seen – a war movie in which the only explosions come from within.

GOOD NIGHT, & GOOD LUCK.

Good Night, & Good Luck, which tells of television journalist Edward R. Murrow's heroic on-air battles against Senator Joe McCarthy in the mid-'50s, is an unapologetic love letter to the liberal media, yet it isn't the slightest bit pompous, and it honors Murrow's accomplishments with exactly the amount of reverence they deserve. The film is quiet, but it isn't somber, it isn't defeatist, and it isn't gloating. Director/co-screenwriter George Clooney (who also appears as Murrow's loyal producer Fred Friendly) has filled his stunningly well-calibrated entertainment with wit and rueful good humor, and it rewards an audience that's willing to pay attention; this intelligent, graceful movie keeps you, at all times, alert. Leading a superlative cast that includes Robert Downey Jr., Patricia Clarkson, Frank Langella, Ray Wise, and Jeff Daniels, David Strathairn is both a sterling dramatic presence and a masterfully subtle comedian – the self-mocking disdain with which he conducts an interview with Liberace, questioning the pianist about marital plans, is devastatingly, affectionately funny. Thrillingly well-shot, in evocative black-and-white, by Robert Elswit, and clocking in at a crisp 90 minutes,
Good Night, & Good Luck
is just about perfect, and the applause that greeted the movie's finale felt less like liberal back-patting than sincere appreciation for a job well done. It was most deserved.

CHICKEN LITTLE

A quick search through the Internet Movie Database reveals Disney's *Chicken Little* to be the first film in which Garry Marshall provides the voice for an animated character. What the hell took so long? Playing the worried father to a little chick (voiced by Zach Braff) who's – with reason, it turns out – concerned about the falling sky, Marshall is a stitch, his paternal gruffness playing off his Borscht-belt comic cadences to terrific effect; when he gets some halfway decent lines, Marshall's feathered papa is a hoot. He's also – at least if you're over the age of eight – just about the only reason to sit through the movie. It's probably unfair for us to hope that every new computer-animated release will display the wit and depth of
Finding Nemo
or
The Incredibles
, but
Chicken Little
– Disney's first computer-animated opus since its split with Pixar – is a depressingly slight and uninspired thing, filled with obnoxious supporting characters, cheaply predictable sentiment, and a plot that's even less substantial than the Chicken Little story itself. (The movie's incessant reliance on pop tunes belies its thinness – if I counted correctly, there are three music montages in the first reel
alone
.) The visuals are fine, but they can't compensate for the film's saccharine, namby-pamby banality, or the waste of an almost obscenely inspired vocal cast; how do you snag Braff, Joan Cusack, Steve Zahn, Fred Willard, Catherine O'Hara, and Wallace Shawn for your movie and neglect to give them anything funny to
say
? In
Chicken Little
, the sky is indeed falling, and so are your spirits.