

Pilot Lit: "Flight," "Wreck-It Ralph," and "The Man with the Iron Fists"

Written by Mike Schulz

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FLIGHT

Within the first 15 minutes of director Robert Zemeckis' *Flight*, you'll witness what must rank as one of cinema's most frightening, emotionally wrenching plane crashes. Yet in the end, and as harrowing as this passage is, I'm not sure that it's actually more terrifying or heartbreaking than the scenes of Denzel Washington's Whip Whitaker – the pilot whose heroic actions save 96 lives aboard that ill-fated flight – battling his urge to drink and, with only the mildest feelings of regret, losing that battle again and again and again.

Though rare, movies about characters suffering from alcoholism generally follow the same template: a few early, unsettling highs for our protagonist followed by a rather disastrous low at around the mid-film mark, followed by numerous scenes of support and steady progress (interrupted by one more drunken setback) before the inevitably hopeful, if not exactly happy, conclusion. And *Flight* doesn't fully diverge from this familiar blueprint. But it also feels unlike any film about alcohol addiction I've seen; buoyed by Washington's rather extraordinary performance – one that, I think, is far finer than the two he previously won Oscars for – Zemeckis' latest gets at the frightening, unpredictable *threat* behind alcoholism in ways that feel both freshly imagined and universally true.

Coupled with the film's tortured yet routinely unrepentant leading figure, its narrative – which finds Whitaker's heavy drinker and frequent coke-head a subject of investigation after his

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plane's horrific free-fall – might make *Flight* sound like an unbearable experience. Blessedly, though, Zemeckis is also a born entertainer (at least when not making boring, motion-capture-animated features such as

Polar Express

and

Beowulf

). With its script by John Gatins, the movie does feature a few ill-considered comic gambits, such as the decision to have John Goodman play Whitaker's drug-dealing enabler with such unwarranted cartoon relish; every once in a while, for too many minutes, this tough-minded tale is infiltrated by awkward bursts of

The Big Lebowski

. (I can't think of too many instances in which a

Big Lebowski

infiltration would be considered a damaging thing, but this turns out to be one of them.) In general, however, Gatins' deft, engaging screenplay appears marvelously insightful about the endless cycle of rationalizations and lies necessary for a closeted alcoholic to

remain

closeted, and Zemeckis stages a series of compositionally brilliant and enormously gripping scenes that demonstrate Whitaker's plight in visual terms. The long, haunting close-up of a miniature bottle of vodka just out of the pilot's reach nearly throbs with tension, and during one particularly painful encounter, a recovering addict (beautifully played by Kelly Reilly, who's like a beaten-up Jessica Chastain here) gingerly attempts to comfort Whitaker while Zemeckis' camera shrewdly delays our awareness of the beer bottle in his hand, and the dozen empties resting behind him. Zemeckis keeps the aching

danger

of alcohol addiction – for Whitaker, for his passengers, for those attempting to help him – in constant view, and in doing so, lends his addiction drama the electric charge of a first-rate thriller.

Denzel Washington, meanwhile, lends it the power and force of a Shakespearean tragedy, and his spectacularly textured turn, charming and pathetic and at all times wholly convincing, may stand as a new high-water mark in a career rife with them. There are sharp, formidable portrayals courtesy of Don Cheadle, Bruce Greenwood, Melissa Leo, and many others, but Washington, in *Flight*, gives an instant-classic performance – the type that makes you say "My God

he's good" some 30 years after our first hints about how good he actually was. The means by which Washington's Whitaker lands his plane are described as miraculous. The means by which Washington creates this fascinatingly complex, troubled character are awfully miraculous, too.

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WRECK-IT RALPH

As *Wreck-It Ralph* concerns an endearing video-game villain (sweetly voiced by John C. Reilly) who longs to escape the early-'80s arcade game he's trapped in, director Rich Moore's animated saga would seem custom-tailored to my generation of fortysomethings, and I'll admit, at the film's start, to giggling at the witty period references and appearances by the likes of Q-Bert and that blinking ghost that caused Pac-Man so much grief. Unfortunately, my initial, child-like enthusiasm wasn't enough to offset my eventual disappointment with the film's formulaic plotting and presentation; while stunning to look at, what starts as a clever spin on Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* morphs into yet another animated outing that (like this spring's *The Lorax*) slowly and inevitably morphs into a dully serviceable action comedy with "heart." It's still diverting and clever enough, I suppose, and kids should eat it up, but I was really hoping that *Wreck-It Ralph* would emerge as a cinematic video-game worth playing for 90 minutes, when 15, it turns out, would've been more than enough.



THE MAN WITH THE IRON FISTS

If you've seen its trailers, you'll probably know just what to expect from director/star/co-writer RZA's ultra-violent martial-arts lark *The Man with the Iron Fists*: cornball "I shall seek *revenge!!!*" dialogue, garish costuming and production design, and perhaps more viscera splattered – and more *noisily* splattered – than in *Saw*

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s one through whatever-number-the-series-ended-at combined. Yet amidst the weakly staged, mostly inept one-dimensionality of it all, and with RZA proving a rather stultifying lead, there is one element that genuinely amuses here: Russell Crowe's deliriously self-amused performance as the soft-spoken assassin Jack Knife (seriously), whose introductory scene finds him slicing a Sumo-wrestler-sized lummoX named Crazy Hippo in half, right before taking three willing concubines to his bedchamber. Somehow, a mere decade and change after suggesting the acting bravura of Marlon Brando, Crowe now suggests

late-period

Brando – happily corpulent and agreeably silly and apparently willing to do damned near anything for a laugh. Are you not entertained?!

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