



## ***WE WERE SOLDIERS***

*We Were Soldiers* is, in many ways, the oddest war movie I've ever seen. It's set during the Ia Drang battle of the Vietnam War, but it's performed and directed with such resolute patriotism and heroism that it feels like a product of World War II, or rather, movies abo  
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orld War II.

Somehow Randall Wallace, who wrote and directed, has made a *conservative* film about Vietnam. Despite the realistic-looking blood and guts that spill across the screen, *We Were Soldiers* could easily play as a companion piece to *The Best Years of Our Lives* or something similarly noble; it's all flag-waving Americana, and yet, amazingly, the film never slips into mere jingoism, as Ridley Scott's recent, loathsome *Black Hawk Down* did. Wallace's movie is filled with groaningly bad dialogue and stock characters, but is so earnest about its good intentions that I kinda fell for it.

The film is based on the memoir *We Were Soldiers Once ... & Young* by Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, personified in the movie by Mel Gibson and Barry Pepper. They are but two of the hundreds of soldiers who fought in one of the most violent confrontations of an unimaginably violent war, and the movie often matches the visual virtuosity of seminal Vietnam works such as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*. Wallace, best known as the screenwriter of *Braveheart*, shows a gift for the excruciating fear and danger of war, and whenever *We Were Soldiers* focuses on Moore and his steadfast determination not to leave any soldiers behind, the movie achieves a marvelous blend of heroic dynamism with gritty reality. (Playing Moore, Mel Gibson forgoes the going-through-the-motions bluster of his recent *The Patriot*

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Written by Mike Schulz

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and gives a solid, most respectable performance.) It's also high praise to say that Wallace plays fair with the Vietnamese, not seen as a faceless enemy that must be destroyed, but as a separate culture with as much to lose as the Americans.

*We Were Soldiers*

never delves deeply into the politics of Vietnam – which is part of the reason the movie plays like a World War II picture – but it's an affecting piece of work, made with care and obvious passion.

If only its script weren't so terrible! But, unfortunately, making it through *We Were Soldiers* means sitting through a

*lot*

of painful moments you've sat through a hundred times before: the long-suffering spouses waiting at home (poor Madeleine Stowe is stuck playing Moore's selfless wife), the tow-headed kids wondering where Daddy's going, and – I swear to God – the line "Tell my wife I love her," which I thought was permanently enshrined in the Cliché Hall of Fame. Little matter;

*Braveheart*

's script sucked, too.

*We Were Soldiers*

features enough visual poetry to make up for the poetry lacking in the screenplay, and for audiences numbed by the badness of works like

*Black Hawk Down*

,  
*The Patriot*

, and

*Pearl Harbor*

, it's a more-than-honorable effort.



**40 DAYS & 40 NIGHTS**

Your tolerance for the no-sex comedy *40 Days & 40 Nights* will completely depend on your tolerance for lead Josh Hartnett, and therein lies the problem: He's merely *tolerable*

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. Playing a young man who swears off all manner of physical and romantic stimulation during Lent, only to meet his perfect match while in his orgasm exile, Hartnett pulls off the romantic gush with co-star Shannyn Sossamon ably enough. But he's also asked to perform apoplectic, "comic" routines in which his character is at his horniest, and Hartnett, pardon the pun, isn't up to it. Off the top of my head, I can think of a bunch of young actors – Breckin Meyer, Nicholas Brendon, Vince Vieluf, Seth Green, Kyle Howard, Justin Long – who have demonstrated slapstick gifts well beyond their years and who might have made this farce, ridiculous as it is, *funny*

; Hartnett might be a bigger star than all of them, but a comedian he is not. I'm not quite sure what he is. He's carving out a career as a cute, affable, but deadly dull leading man; Hartnett is turning into Kevin Costner Jr. (Maybe it's time for him to return to Bad Boy territory; his performance as the street-smart dooper in

*The Faculty*

remains his best.) It's doubtful, though, that any performer could fully salvage

*40 Days & 40 Nights*

, a film in which every supporting male is a geek, every supporting female is a slut, and no one is as amusing as they think they are. Director Michael Lehmann was once smart enough to have helmed

*Heathers*

, but this one, sad to say, verges closer to his work on

*Hudson Hawk*

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**AMÉLIE**

I recently pulled off an incredible feat, as I made it through 15 whole minutes of *Amélie* without wanting to throw something at the screen. I say this despite being in a distinct minority: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's "whimsical" romantic fantasy was a smash hit in its native France, has raked in big bucks during its American engagement, has been nominated for five Academy Awards including Best Foreign Film and Best Original Screenplay, and is winning throngs of fans, including many local ones, who generally won't sit through an import of its kind; you have to reach back to 1998's

*Life Is Beautiful*

to find a subtitled work that has, as of this writing, lasted in our area for more than two weeks.

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And yet I found this French phenomenon so coy, so precious, and so insistently in-your-face that I grew to hate it more and more with each new scene.

For the uninitiated, Amélie (Audrey Tautou) is an introverted young Parisian who performs random acts of kindness for friends and strangers but can't seem to connect with the man of her dreams (Mathieu Kassovitz). That's the idea anyway. To my eyes, Amélie is a passive-aggressive simp – she does indeed do nice things for people, but just as happily pulls off elaborately cruel practical jokes on those she detests – and I wanted the man she was ogling to escape France as quickly as possible. Much of the furor over the film is due to Jeunet's direction, with the film's reality interspersed with wild flights of fantasy; imaginary playmates appear, inanimate objects begin speaking, a woman's tears become a waterfall, things like that. Yet these momentary bursts, amusing as several of them are, only serve to point out the thinness of the story, and are so aggressively overstaged that a few of us start feeling resentful; I kept fighting the urge to scream, "Hey, Jean-Pierre, back off!" *Amélie* is an absolutely overbearing trifle; its success in France isn't surprising given their notorious obsession with the *oeuvre* of Jerry Lewis, but to me it just proves that Hollywood isn't the only purveyor of bloated overkill disguised as entertainment.