

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "FLYBOYS"

Addressing the latest crop of spanking new American volunteers, who are literally dying to fly, Jean Reno's French Captain Thenault warns them that their life expectancy is "between three to six weeks." How these young men fight the gravity of Captain Thenault's words, as well as the gravity of a planet that's determined to keep them earthbound through fate as much as physics, is just one leg of the journey that is "Flyboys." In the words of another Frenchman, Alexandre Dumas, with his Musketeer credo of "one for all and all for one," the story of how these dogfighting heroes come to accept the selflessness required of them for each battle in particular, all the while accepting the futility of the war in general, is another. Throw in themes of tolerance, loyalty, peace, with a little joie de vivre on the side and voila! c'est magnifique.

Based on the true story of the legendary flying squadron, the Lafayette Escadrille, "Flyboys" takes place in 1917 France, prior to America entering WWI. The rudimentary airplane, originally meant to be an observational tool, had developed into an actual weapon of war. With the Allies losing, they were desperate for all the help they could get. Enter a few American volunteers, especially those who wanted to learn how to fly and even if they weren't exactly battle ready, no one turned them down.

As the film opens, the American flyboys are introduced: First, Blaine Rawlings (James Franco), forced to leave his family's repossessed ranch in Texas; next, a fellow from Nebraska, determined to make his fiancée proud; then a black boxer, grateful to France for treating him far more hospitably than his own country; lastly, a pouty rich boy suffering through a lecture from his aristocratic father about his disappointing behavior.

The filmmakers chose to cast largely unknown actors, wanting to keep the veracity of fresh-faced 20-year-olds intact. The idea worked. Instead of watching a revamped "Hell's Angels" starring a Matt Damon or a Baldwin, these unknowns are completely believable as naïve lambs being led to foreign slaughter. Another unknown, Rawlings' love interest played by Jennifer Decker, is stunning as a girl turned instant mother to her three orphaned nephews. Through her loss, the impersonal obliteration of families in a faceless war becomes ultimately, utterly personal. It is in Rawlings' kneejerk reaction to save the girl, no matter what the cost, that we see his true heroic nature. This is James Franco's picture all the way after having to play second fiddle Harry Osborn to "Spiderman" since 2002, it's highly satisfying to see that this actor has plenty of strength and charisma to step into the role of a leading man. Portraying cynical veteran pilot Cassidy, Martin Henderson works in perfect counterpoint to Franco, as a worldly Han Solo helping Luke Skywalker to understand the world around him. The only actor who seems a bit off is Jean Reno. Between his sly winks and "what-are-you-gonna-do?" shrugs, his Captain Thenault is more like an avuncular kiddie show emcee than a tough, battle-fatigued officer of war.

Perfect pacing, lifelike battle scenes utilizing the latest in CGI and digital camera technology, a strong screenplay, a glorious soundtrack and scenery to die for, this movie has it all. From taking in a picture-perfect glide over an achingly beautiful French countryside one minute to viewing a bleak, charred wasteland just a few miles away, the visual contrasts are in tune to the picture's rhythms and lighthearted frolicking with the

children one minute, to a bloody battle scene the very next.

Tony Bill hasn't directed a feature since 1987's "Five Corners." But if we had to wait nearly 20 years for a film this epic, this sweeping, this soaringâ€”it was well worth it.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: A-

Production Credits: "Flyboys" Directed by Tony Bill Written by Phil Sears & Blake T. Evans and David S. Ward Cast: James Franco, Martin Henderson, David Ellison, Jennifer Decker, Jean Reno Rated: PG-13 Running Time: 139 minutes Grade: A-

The Screen Savor: â€”A New Altitudeâ€”™ by Kimberly_Gadette