

Flight: A pilot saves the day, but not himself

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Directed by Robert Zemeckis, written by John Gatins

In *Flight*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, Denzel Washington plays Whip Whitaker, a highly skilled commercial airline pilot with a serious drinking and drug problem.

One fateful day, after a night of alcohol shared with a flight attendant, Katerina (Nadine Velazquez), and a morning of cocaine, Whitaker is scheduled to pilot a plane from Orlando, Florida to Atlanta.

The flight departs in bad weather and Whitaker is obliged to push the airplane to its limit to find a break in the turbulence. He proceeds to nap while his co-pilot, Ken Evans (Brian Geraghty), takes over the controls.

Some minutes later, however, the aircraft begins to dive uncontrollably. Whitaker, exhibiting extraordinary flair and sangfroid, lands the severely damaged plane in a field, with a minimal loss of life.

Proclaimed a hero by the media, Whitaker faces one major difficulty after his release from hospital. Blood drawn from him at the crash site indicated a high level of alcohol and also the presence of cocaine. A clever lawyer, Hugh Lang (Don Cheadle), brought in by Whip's friend and pilots' union representative, Charlie Anderson (Bruce Greenwood), manages to have the toxicology report thrown out on various technical grounds.

The principal challenge for Anderson and Lang now is to make certain that Whitaker arrives at a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) hearing sober and lucid. Needless to say, that plan also unravels.

In the course of these events, while Whitaker more or less secretes himself from the frenzied and unwanted media attention at his grandfather's farm in the country, he forms a relationship with a troubled young woman, Nicole (Kelly Reilly), struggling with heroin

addiction.

There are more interesting and "grown-up" things here than one might have had a reason to expect, based on Zemeckis' history. The filmmaker is responsible for one of the most dreadfully conformist films of the past several decades, *Forrest Gump* (1994), along with the largely forgettable *Romancing the Stone* (1984), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), *Contact* (1997) and *Cast Away* (2000).

The near-crash in *Flight* is effectively and frighteningly filmed. Washington is convincing as a man lying to himself about his problems and alienating others around him in the process. In fact, Zemeckis has collected a number of talented performers, including Greenwood, Cheadle, Reilly, Geraghty, John Goodman as Whip's drug connection, Melissa Leo as an NTSB investigator, Tamara Tunie as a flight attendant on the ill-fated flight, and others.

The script from John Gatins, who apparently has had personal experience with some of the difficulties he portrays, has the merit of taking the various relationships seriously, even if it does not probe them terribly deeply. In other words, this does feel like a film about human beings, not cartoon characters, and that is sadly unusual at present.

That being said, a lot of murkiness goes on here, which does not really add up. The numerous references to God and predestination, the numerous occasions on which objects or individuals fatefully appear (the nearly cleaned-up Nicole drops a box and a hypodermic needle rolls out, a sober Whip discovers an unlocked hotel room door leading to a well-stocked mini-bar, etc.), are enough to make one believe that some point about the inevitability of sin and redemption is being made here.

This is not interesting, and appears at odds with another uninspiring theme broached here as well, the need for individuals to make personally responsible

choices. If we are suddenly to be inflicted with a host of films attempting to revive a general concern with free will versus determinism (see *Cloud Atlas*), we are in for a long, dark winter indeed.

The biggest problem with *Flight* is its relatively vague and abstract character. Alcoholism and alcoholics are legitimate subjects for study, but Zemeckis-Gatins shed relatively little light on the matter, aside from identifying certain states of self-denial and manic behavior.

Not a (psychological or sociological) hint is offered as to why Whip drinks and takes drugs so disastrously and self-destructively. Unhappily, we are well beyond that in contemporary filmmaking. “Explain” is another word that appears in quotation marks more often than not these days.

All the emphasis here is on Whitaker’s shortcomings and need to improve, and no doubt only those not in their right mind would want their airline pilot or heart surgeon to be anything but clear-headed.

But are there any particular pressures and tensions that might be at work on today’s airline pilots and crew members? *Flight* does not register the slightest interest in such a possibility. Gatins’ script, concerned with God, predestination and making one’s way to sobriety, could be set in 2002, 1992 or 1962.

An October 2010 *New York Times* article noted, “Over the last decade, tens of thousands of [airline] employees lost their jobs or experienced deep cuts in wages, health benefits and pensions as carriers went in and out of bankruptcy and struggled with fuel costs and economic shocks.” Has this resulted in any change in the mood or mental circumstances of pilots? Might these conditions be something a filmmaker would want to take into account when considering such an individual’s moral and emotional crisis?

This is not a matter of social accuracy as a thing in itself. Gatins and Zemeckis have the right to ignore all the concreteness they choose to ... but that comes at a price.

A film or any other work of art, however broad its concerns will prove moving and meaningful—and, ultimately, universal—to the public only to the extent that it digs deeply into and calls up the particular time and place of its making, the specific “here and now.” This connection to life as it urgently is gives the work richness and succulence to an audience. It presses the

audience member forward into the work.

Instead, in *Flight*, we sit and watch a series of timeless truisms (at best) about the dangers of deluding oneself and believing in one’s ability to combat various addictions on one’s own. And, as a result, somewhere in the middle of the movie, it all grows a bit tedious.

Again, the onus here is on the pilot and his “personal responsibility.” We never hear a word about those actually responsible for the crash, according to the film’s script itself, the airline or manufacturer who refused to repair the airplane’s tail-section. Will any company executive go to prison over the deaths of six people? We know the answer. So do the filmmakers apparently, because the question is never raised. Unless they are simply indifferent to that as well.

Because of their lack of interest in the bigger, social aspect of the situation and the actual present-day conditions in the airline industry, neither Gatins nor Zemeckis, nor very many others in Hollywood, would be likely to come up with a more complicated, troubling scenario along these lines.

Let’s say an accident occurs, leading to the loss of life, for which the pilot *is* immediately responsible. He is not a media hero; on the contrary, he is demonized. The case then has to be made, both in the law courts and the court of public opinion, that the airline companies and executives, through the overwork, stress and demoralization they have created, are responsible, in the most profound sense, for the tragedy.

In the meantime, we have *Flight*, with its occasional bright spots, but an overall dullness.



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