

Joe Sullivan (Jude Law) and Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow) visit the world of tomorrow.



Pure Pulp

Retro sci-fi robotic future

SKY CAPTAIN AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW:

Written and directed by Kerry Conran. Produced by Jon Avnet, Marsha Oglesby, Sadie Frost, Jude Law. Executive producers Aurelio De Laurentiis, Raffaella De Laurentiis, Bill Haber. Cinematography, Eric Adkins. Production design, Kevin Conran. Editor, Sabrina Plisco. Visual Effects, Scott E. Anderson. Music, Edward Shearmur. Starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Jude Law, with Angelina Jolie, Giovanni Ribisi, Michael Gambon, Bai Ling, Omid Djalili. Paramount Pictures, 2004 PG. 107 minutes.

The look of Kerry Conran's first film is compelling from the first, like an old comic book from the late 1930s, with an Art Deco sensibility. The similarity to adventure comics extends beyond the film's visual aesthetics to the characters and plot itself. The film has little depth; everything happens on the surface. What you see is what you get. And that isn't all bad, because *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, set in 1939, entertains with a dynamic, video-game pace that glues your eyes on the action.

I feel foolish when I hold my breath while an obviously incredible feat is performed at physically impossible pressures and speeds. But *Sky Captain's* characters defeat gravity and other physical laws with impunity. They do not tire and never eat, sleep or become irritated. They are invincible, fearless and pumped-up for any challenge. In a word, they are shallow.

In my lexicon, shallow characters mark a film as one to avoid. But here, the characters serve the national comic book nostalgia that has not only infected celebrity collectors but also publishing houses eager for graphic novels and Hollywood studios looking for the next blockbuster. Moreover, the actors who play the four main characters — Sky Captain aka Joe Sullivan (Jude Law); perky photographer and reporter Polly Perkins (Gwyneth Paltrow); Joe's Double Bubble chomping, techie sidekick, Dex Dearborn (Giovanni Ribisi); and Joe's ex-lover, the spunky Brit flygal Franky Cook (Angelina Jolie) — inhabit their roles so comfortably and speak so confidently we almost forget how few acting channels they are using in this work.

"Almost" is the operative word in that sentence. Because if I answer honestly: "Do you care what becomes of these characters when the film is over?" Not really, I must say. I will sit through the next installments of *Harry Potter*, *Hellboy* and *Spider-Man*, and I'd like to see more of the dog in *Triplets of Bellville*. But once-through *Sky Captain* is

enough. Even though I like some of the elegant visuals, especially the opening sequence of the dirigible docking at the top of the Empire State Building, the film's urgent special effects overwhelm Joe and Polly's light

comedic bantering, the primary strength of Conran's clever screenplay.

Conran's experimental technique, which you can read about from multiple sources, was to shoot the actors against blue-screen,

then computer-generate and insert everything but the most personal props. Mostly, Conran's work is quite good, but sometimes the film takes on a dark-sepia shade, and figures in close-up are incongruent with the background. Because Conran's blue-screen process isolates the actors from their surroundings, it destroys the empathic power that comes from actual bodies interacting in real space.

While robots aren't intrinsically interesting to me, I enjoyed the visual disconnect of seeing shiny, tin-can man robots in contemporary street scenes in *I, Robot*. But the robots roaming King Kong's old neighborhood in *Sky Captain* look quite at home. Clunky CGI death machines fit right into the city's murky atmosphere. It's the humans who look out-of-place.

Nevertheless, the large audience I saw the film with Friday afternoon clapped enthusiastically when the film ended. That may indicate audience popularity for *Sky Captain* and the new technologies that brought it in for around \$70 million, a relatively low blockbuster budget. We'll see. Entertaining and largely charming, this pulp fantasy cast with flair into a retro-future of robots and aerial dogfights is now playing at Cinema World and Cinemark. Highly recommended. **EW**

movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH



Alchemy

Erotic suspense

INTIMATE STRANGERS: Directed by Patrice Leconte. Written by Leconte and Jérôme Tonnerre. Produced by Alain Sarde. Executive producer, Christine Gozlan. Cinematography, Eduardo Serra. Editor, Joëlle Hache. Production design, Ivan Maussion. Music, Pascal Estève. Starring Fabrice Luchini and Sandrine Bonnaire, with Michel Duchaussoy, Anne Brochet, Laurent Gamelon, Hélène Surgère, Gilbert Melki and Urbain Cancelier. Paramount Classics, 2004. 104 minutes. R. **Official selection, Berlin Film Festival.**

Another offbeat character-driven, light-hearted encounter between a man and a woman from the master of such small social comedies, French director Patrice Leconte. One of my favorite, all-time films directed by Leconte is *The Girl on the Bridge* (2000), for which I wrote: "That's it, the whole deal: Knife-thrower turns potential suicide into libidinal object, and both get off on it." For this strangely wonderful film I could say, "In a case of mistaken identity a stuck-in-a-rut tax accountant plays psychotherapist to a beautiful woman in a loveless marriage, and both get off on it."

Well, it may be a bit more subtle than that. Anna (Sandrine Bonnaire) bursts into a Paris office one winter afternoon, where she begins to breathlessly tell William Faber (Fabrice Luchini) her marital woes. Anna assumes she's in the office of Dr. Monnier (Michel Duchaussoy) down the hall, but the bored,

services. Mrs. Muolon, by the way, came with the apartment, the office and the tax business William inherited from his father.

William talks to his ex-lover, Jeanne (Anne Brochet), about Anna, but Jeanne's pretty involved with her new beau, Luc (Laurent Gamelon), a fitness animal who sees William as a girly-man. Anna's husband, Marc (Gilbert Melki), puts in his two-cents worth. Even the poor bastard Anna befriends near the elevator, a patient of Monnier who's terrified of elevators, has opinions.

This generous send-up of psychotherapy, midlife crises and the way unlikely individuals are sometimes just right for each other is one of the best films of the year. For discerning adults who don't need to have everything explained and all wrapped up, who accept the mysteries of life as gifts, eavesdropping on *Intimate Strangers'* central pair is pure pleasure. Bonnaire shows Anna as a gracefully nervous, seductively independent and sincerely confused woman, while Luchini lets himself go in a manic, solo dance in his apartment to Wilson Pickett's lively "In the Midnight Hour."

A slow dance of opposites, *Intimate Strangers* opens Friday at the Bijou. See it early, or it will be gone. Very highest recommendations. **EW**