



FACT SHEET

Week beginning Monday 11 September 2006

Media and Technology

Film Reviews: United 93 / Snakes on a Plane

Well my choice was like this: there were two aeroplane disaster movies up for grabs. One of them sounded harrowing, gut-wrenching and genuinely terrifying while the other sounded really silly – but, possibly, quite a lot of fun.

Now, I'm a nervous flyer at the best of times. I'm one of those people – and there are a few of us around I believe – who is pretty certain that we are never going to get to our destination until we are actually safe on the ground and picking out our bags from the carousel. So I didn't think it would be a very smart thing for me to go and see the genuinely terrifying movie - so I chose the silly one instead.

The gut-wrencher was, of course, United 93 – the movie which sets out to depict what it must have been like on that one hi-jacked plane which did not make it to its target on September 11, 2001. It's the first of a number of movies inspired by the events of September 11 which are beginning to emerge - attempting to focus on the human face of that great tragedy – to examine, in a dramatised way, the manner in which individuals died or survived and the heroic actions of the emergency workers – many of whom also lost their lives on that day.

In the case of United 93 no one survived the crash so the script had to be pieced together from scraps of information such as mobile phone calls from passengers and crew and the records of what took place in control centres on the ground. The main premise of the movie seems to be that at least some of the passengers and crew were able to co-ordinate an attempt to overpower the hijackers.

The movie's title, United 93, seems to carry a deeper meaning than the simple reference to the designated flight number. Did the mixture of everyday people on this plane unite in an attempt to overwhelm the men who had taken control of the aircraft?

Perhaps they did and the drama which has been created for the screen is apparently first rate. The movie has been greeted with universal acclaim but I think that if you are contemplating going to see it you need to bear in mind some of the provisos which have been attached to that acclaim. Words and phrases such as "moving", "almost unbearable" and "hardly entertaining" are sprinkled through the critiques I've read.

United 93 is not just another Airport drama and the bottom line is, of course, that there is no happy ending.

Now the silly movie, which I chose to see, has the absolutely unequivocal title of Snakes on a Plane. That's what it says and that's what you get. When you think about it for a moment it's quite a clever concept for a scary flick – many people are scared of flying and just about everyone is scared of snakes – so, if you combine the two phobias you've got a lot of good scary fun.

And that's just what Snakes on a Plane is – it has no pretensions about being anything else. And for me it worked just fine. It was two hours of pure action, adventure and

escapism – exactly the opposite kind of movie to United 93. For two hours at least you can forget about the horrors of the real world while you are drawn into a loopy scenario in which the bad guys have contrived to let loose dozens of venomous snakes on a commercial airline flight in order to try to cause it to crash.

Why use snakes to bring down a plane, you might ask? Well it's easier to smuggle the snakes on board. Security people and sniffer dogs look for bombs not snakes, see? It makes a silly kind of sense. In addition, you need something to drive the normally fairly timid snakes into a frenzy of aggression so how do you do this? Well, the plane in question is flying from Hawaii to Los Angeles so all the passengers get one of those charming floral necklaces – the leis – as they depart Honolulu. However, on this occasion, the bad guys have managed to spray the flowers with a pheromone which drives the snakes nuts and induces them to want to sink their fangs into everything in sight.

All is normal as the plane takes off and the polyglot assortment of passengers and crew settle down for their flight. This “ship of fools” group of characters is well-drawn and deftly depicted. They include a self-absorbed black rock star and his two fat minders; a pompous English businessman; a honeymoon couple with the guy paranoid about flying; two unaccompanied little boys; a woman with a baby and so on. They are all well played.

The reason for the snakes and the determination of the bad guys to bring down the plane is that the plane is also carrying an important witness to a court hearing in LA. If he gets there his testimony will seal the fate of a really nasty gang boss (who we meet in a very violent encounter during the opening sequences of the movie). However, the witness is in the protective custody of FBI Agent Neville Flynn played with great flair by Samuel L. Jackson so we know that the snakes are going to be in for a hard time if they try to get at his witness. But try they do. When the plane reaches cruising altitude the snakes' containers in the cargo hold pop open allowing the reptiles to slither out and the fun to begin.

Now, don't get me wrong. While Snakes on a Plane is good fun, it is fun in a very gruesome manner and it is certainly not for the squeamish. Once the snakes are on the loose people meet their ends in an assortment of hideous ways. The producers of this film have been amazingly inventive in thinking up ways of despatching both people and, for that matter, snakes.

If you can recall a movie from several years ago called Final Destination which was characterised by the sheer invention of the variety of ways in which people came to sticky ends then you would have a fair idea of what to expect from Snakes on a Plane. The thing is that while the movie takes itself quite seriously it permits the audience to take it all with a wry smile – and even the occasional guffaw. You have to set your disbelief firmly to one side but, if you do, you will find Snakes on a Plane a rattling good ride.

This movie sets out to entertain. That's the concept, after all, that kick-started the motion picture industry just over one hundred years ago. Ninety per cent of all the movies that have ever been made have set out to do this. And Snakes on a Plane does it well. I'd give it three and a half stars out of five for the sheer outrageous horror of it.

John J. McGowan
August 28, 2006