

WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL

***Flight of the Red Balloon* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

David Medaris on Monday 04/07/2008 3:00 pm , (4) Recommendations

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Flight of the Red Balloon enjoyed its Wisconsin premiere at the Orpheum Theatre on Sunday afternoon, during the Wisconsin Film Festival. Judging by the outbreak of applause at the end of the screening, the festival audience enjoyed it right back.

Out of respect for those who enjoyed the movie, and for those who might one day enjoy the movie, I would advise you to stop reading right now and go read something else. I'm inserting 21 hard breaks here as an added buffer against the possibility my own reaction to the movie might offend your sensibilities; consider yourself cautioned.

Flight of the Red Balloon may be the worst movie I've ever seen. I hedge because it has been more than 30 years since I made the awful mistake of sitting through *War of the Zombies*, a 1964 Italian production that has until now been the worst movie I've ever seen, and it would be unfair of me to make this call without going back and suffering through it again.

But this homage to Albert Lamorisse's 1956 classic *The Red Balloon* is so bad that it is difficult to avoid employing the adjectival and noun forms of the most familiar words found in the Abridged Dictionary of Expletives.

I was predisposed to like this movie for several reasons. One, it stars Juliette Binoche, whose acting has never disappointed me. Two, this is a French production directed by a Taiwanese director, and I've found European and Asian movies rewarding time after time. Three, the two principal supporting cast members -- Simon Iteanu as the young son of Binoche's character, and Song Fang as his nanny -- both have innate, engaging appeal. Four, it is set in Paris, one of my all-time favorite cities.

But the film does next to nothing with this cast. The narrative thread of the movie is so thin as to pull apart in the slightest breeze. It is as if director Hou Hsiao Hsien has pointed the cameras at the actors and gone wandering away from the set, leaving the cast to figure out what to do with themselves. Nothing of any real significance occurs. I felt like I was watching two hours of the most mundane lives imaginable. The only reason I sat all the way through it is because I kept thinking some insight into the human condition would be revealed, that the movie would redeem itself with some revelation during its denouement.

Instead, nothing. No payoff. Not even the red balloon itself works as anything resembling a metaphor. Instead, it shows up at various points in the movie, floating over the rooftops of Paris, following the young boy and his nanny, even appearing outside the windows of the apartment where much of the movie takes place -- casting a kind of ominous sense of surveillance that calls to mind the big creepy white balloon thingy that repeatedly hunted down and pacified Patrick McGoohan's title character in the 1960s British series *The Prisoner*.

I came away from *Flight of the Red Balloon* feeling the kind of furious aggravation one feels when one squanders two hours that might have been spent on something -- anything -- productive or enjoyable. It's my fault for sitting all the way through *Flight of the Red Balloon* when I could have walked out. For this, I take full responsibility. And it must be noted that several critics I respect and admire -- including J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* (who called it "a movie of genius"), *Entertainment Weekly's* Lisa Schwarzbaum and Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* -- gave *Flight of the Red Balloon* high marks. But I despise this movie to such a degree that for the rest of my life I'm liable to stick a pin into any red balloon that comes close enough to reach, and take enormous pleasure in the revenge of popping it.

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