

Denzel Washington Pilots Nearly Flawless ‘Flight’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 1, 2012 - 9:41am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Few films have more deftly walked the tightrope through a moral gray area than Robert Zemeckis’ stunning “Flight,” one of the best dramas of the year that also just happens to include the best performance from two-time Oscar winner Denzel Washington in the last decade. Reminding us what he can do with a deep, complex character, Washington completely embodies the soul of a man dealing with a life crash long after he’s no longer in the cockpit of an actual plane. Working from an Oscar-worthy script by John Gatins, Zemeckis & Washington work together to deliver an adult-oriented drama that is so consistently entertaining and fascinating that it plays like a thriller even if the thrills aren’t produced from traditional devices but from the sense that you’re watching masters at work.

Whip Whitaker (Denzel Washington) is not a good guy. If you knew he was your pilot and knew his background, you wouldn’t get on his plane. He’s been a pilot for so long that he can do it in his sleep. And he’s been an alcoholic and drug addict for even longer. “Flight” opens in a personality-less hotel room as Whip wakes up alongside a naked flight attendant named Katerina (Nadine Velazquez), downs the backwash left in a cheap beer bottle, does a couple of lines of cocaine, and dons his pilot gear. He’s got a plane to fly.



Flight

Photo credit: Paramount

It turns out that today is *that day* for Whip – the day that everything changes. Everything seems just fine at first, especially after Whip pilots the crew, which includes Katerina, through a horrendous storm. He leaves the duties to co-pilot Ken (Brian Geraghty) and downs a few celebratory

bottles of vodka before taking a nap in his cockpit. Things go wrong when it's time to land and a mechanical error sends the plane plummeting to the ground. Whip thinks quickly and pulls off a miracle landing that involves inverting the plane to try and slow its descent. A few souls are lost on the way to safety but Whip is generally considered a life-saving hero. Until the toxicology report comes back.

And that's just the beginning of "Flight." After Whip crashes, he faces some important figures in his life, including another recovering addict named Nicole (Kelly Reilly), an attorney tasked with keeping Whip out of jail named Hugh Lang (Don Cheadle), and a representative from the Pilots Union named Charlie Anderson (Bruce Greenwood), an old friend who isn't sure what should happen to Whip. You won't be either. "Flight" is a daringly complex drama in the way Gatins and Zemeckis refuse to spoon-feed answers to their audience. Should Whip be put on a pedestal for saving more lives than, we're told, nearly any other pilot in the world would have been able to save? Would he have saved them all if he wasn't drunk? Should he go to jail? "Flight" never gives viewers a clean set of answers to these questions, leaving them open for discussion throughout and even after the credits.



Flight

Photo credit: Paramount

It complicates and amplifies the drama even more that Whip Whitaker is kind of a dick. I believe Nicole becomes an important supporting character to offer not just a romantic interest for Whip but a personality counterpoint. Nicole wants to get clean. Whip doesn't really. He has to in order to not be seen by reporters itching to catch him with a shot glass but he doesn't *want to*. And abrasive interactions between Whip and his estranged family or the people trying to help him make clear that he's been trouble since long before the crash. "Flight" would have been a good movie if it was about an alcoholic trying to find redemption but it's a great one because it's about an alcoholic who's not sure he wants anything but a drink. He saved dozens of people who would otherwise be dead. Leave him alone.

As Whip's personal plane crash of life gets more complex and he's forced to make some life maneuvers of his own, he becomes an even more demanding character for an actor. Scenes where he confronts survivors from his flight crew who know what state he was in that day – one at a funeral and one in a hospital room – are master classes in how to walk the fine line of a character like this, pushing the audience just to the brink of where we're willing to write Whip off entirely and then bringing us back again. And Washington never falls back on any of the bombastic crutches he's used so often in recent years. This is arguably his best performance, period. He's that good.



Flight
Photo credit: Paramount

It helps to have a director like Robert Zemeckis to pilot this plane with such confidence and artistic caliber. Zemeckis and his team do something remarkable in "Flight" in that they give it space and time to develop. There are long scenes of dialogue in "Flight" and yet the film never once sags or feels long (even though it runs nearly 140 minutes). Arguments and scenes of dialogue have a natural rhythm without losing the degree of entertainment we need from a film. Most films are cut too quickly with dialogue scenes seen as filler between action or suspense and, of course, there are hundreds of art films in which conversations seem never-ending. "Flight" has the perfect balance in its pace.

What's perhaps most remarkable about "Flight" is how much it lingers and improves in memory. It's the films that force us to ask questions instead of the ones that merely give us obvious answers that live on pass the credits. They're becoming increasingly rare. "Flight" is a rare film.

"Flight" stars Denzel Washington, Kelly Reilly, Don Cheadle, Bruce Greenwood, and John Goodman. It was written by John Gatins and directed by Robert Zemeckis. It opens on November 2, 2012.



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