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THE AVIATOR _____ 7 / 10

Short version of Howard Hughes' remarkable life and times

Written by John Logan

Directed by Martin Scorsese

Leonardo DiCaprio ... Howard Hughes
Cate Blanchett ... Katharine Hepburn
Kate Beckinsale ... Ava Gardner
John C. Reilly ... Noah Dietrich
Alec Baldwin ... Juan Trippe
Alan Alda ... Senator Ralph Owen Brewster
Ian Holm ... Professor Fitz

This review stems from a "rewatch," the first viewing occurring on New Year's Eve. It's a fairly long movie and our group was there through the ending into the new year in a nearly empty theater. But this is worthwhile moviemaking; the writers give us a true American hero who takes on the State and, at least for a while, wins.

Hughes was the son of a Texas oilman-inventor who set up a company and earned a fortune; the old man died when Howard was 18, leaving Howard as a multimillionaire engineering student. The Aviator follows Howard from 1930, when he produced the movie Hell's Angels, to 1947 when, at the age of 42, Howard flew the H4-Hercules aircraft he had designed and built (aka the Spruce Goose).

Following the death of his parents, Hughes moved to Hollywood and to become a movie producer. He was instrumental in the launch of Jean Harlow's career, and he took a special interest in other celebrity movie femmes in those days. He produced and directed Hell's Angels (Harlow) as well as The Front Page, Flying Leathernecks, and Scarface.

He also created the controversial movie The Outlaw (1941), which featured Jane Russell's prominent "features." The censors were alarmed by her magnificent breasts. Hughes would ultimately own his own studio, RKO.

Hughes was an avid flyboy; he loved flying and the inventiveness the engineering of aircraft encouraged in him. As the eventual founder of Hughes Aircraft, he set many world flight records. The movie presents his achievements in cinema and aviation and provides footage of Hughes' two large romances with Katharine Hepburn (Cate Blanchett) and Ava Gardner (Kate Beckinsale).

Leonardo DiCaprio plays a solid Howard Hughes, and was nominated for best actor for the role. I still think of Leonardo as a kid, probably because I first remember him as a retarded youngster in an bizarre movie What's Eating Gilbert Grape, which also starred young Johnny Depp. My guess is the real Howard Hughes was more of a presence, more of a force of nature... at least when he was in his prime.

Still, DiCaprio captures the cockeyed romanticism, his creativity, his enthusiasm, and his personal courage in facing the obsessive-compulsive disorder that seemed intent on putting him under.

Cate Blanchett is one of my favorite actresses. (Did anyone see her as Connie, playing across from John Cusack in the very entertaining movie Pushing Tin? Her nailing such a minor role to perfection told me she's one of the very best.) As Hepburn, Cate turns in another brilliant interpretation.

I love the scene where Hughes and Hepburn are visiting her rich socialist parents on the East Coast: One of the parents is carrying on about how money doesn't matter, to which the young Hughes replies with words to the effect, "It doesn't matter to you because you have it; it means a lot to the people who have to work for it." Shutdown!

As for the technical capabilities, Michael Mann (producer) and Scorsese assemble a magnificent mixture of camera work, costumes, sets, and effects. I've not seen a more exacting replication of a plane crash scene than the one of Hughe's test plane crash in a Beverly Hills neighborhood. I also enjoyed the flight of the Hercules toward movie's end.

You get the glitz and the grime of the 20s thru 40s.

Hughes makes enemies of Pan Am exec Juan Trippe (Alec Baldwin); Pan Am has basically bought US Senator Ralph Brewster (Alan Alda) who heads the committee overseeing commercial airlines. It's worth the price of the movie to see the Hughes character defy the lackey Senator, leading to the demonopolization of international air flight.

As we know, Howard Hughes in later decades worked willingly for the national security apparatus, he cooperated with Joe McCarthy's fascist hysteria against communism in the 1950s, he was awarded numerous military and CIA spy-hardware contracts, and he probably helped in dirty tricks for Dick Nixon. These activities are not covered in the movie.

By and large a worthy effort, just not the full picture. Cate Blanchett did win the Oscar for her performance as Katherine Hepburn, and the movie took home a total of five Academy wins. Entertaining though long.