

Small WWII movie with big-budget impact

Written by Nancy Dowd

Directed by Jonathan Demme

Goldie Hawn ... Kay Walsh

Kurt Russell ... Mike 'Lucky' Lockhart

Christine Lahti ... Hazel

Fred Ward ... Archibald 'Biscuits' Touie

Ed Harris ... Jack Walsh

Sudie Bond ... Annie

Holly Hunter ... Jeannie

"Mable Stoddard's husband is in the Pacific. She took this job for the duration.

'Mrs. Stoddard, how do you like your job?'

'I love it.'

'How about after the war, do you plan to keep on working.'

'Well as I was saying, when my husband comes back, I'm going to be busy, at home.'

'Good for you.'

"Each returning serviceman will get his job back when the war is won. And you girls and women, you'll be going home. Back to being housewives and mothers as you promised to do when you came to work for us. Your lives will return to normal." — Post-war announcement by industry spokesman

Sort of a Memorial Day Weekend continuation, I found *Swing Shift* for the ultra low price of \$4.99 at my local K-Roger store—note, I also found *LA Confidential*, IMHO the Chinatown of the 1990s—and couldn't pass it up. I've seen it several times, and from the Carly Simon tune "Someone Waits for You" accompanying black and white photos of people frolicking on the Los Angeles-area coast December 6, 1941, to the ending post-V-Day credits... I find the film one of the most charming and comfortable, yet socially challenging, treatments of the way we were—make that, the way they (my parents' generation) were—at home, during the cataclysm of WWII.

This movie belongs to the women, particularly Kay Walsh (Goldie Hawn) and Hazel (Christine Lahti), who following Pearl Harbor Day were thrust into a change of life in obvious ways... then soon realized they were changing, as women, in ways that couldn't have been obvious to anyone at the time. World War II: Probably no event in history combined the collective awareness of a (arguably) free people into such an enormous scale of supreme cooperation for a cause. All the compulsions—from the draft, to rationing, to censorship—were generally accepted without question, and people voluntarily sacrificed of themselves in time, money, and energy to support the soldiers.

It quickly became apparent with so many men under arms that the factories turning out armaments, not to mention the necessities of industrial civilization, lacked worker bees. Rosie the Riveter to the rescue. Both Kay and Hazel sign up for manufacturing jobs at MacBride Aircraft Company in Santa Monica. [Kay is the prototypical young homemaker wife, she and her husband Jack (Ed Walsh) moving west from Iowa for (his) better job prospects. In fact, we get a scene very early where he insists she not take a job; "that's man's work, and a man that can't take care of his woman and family isn't much of a man." Or words to that effect.] But patriotism will out.

It's a brand new world for these waves of women taking factory jobs, under the direction and often the harassment of men who remained behind for age, industrial-experience, or health-related reasons. One younger man (with a heart condition), not of the harassing variety, is Lucky Lockhart (Kurt Russell) whose shirtback Kay inadvertently punctures with a drill bit. I guess they call that meet-cute in the movie critic business, but it's a clever enough scene that leads to Lucky asking Kay to come to his club where he plays trumpet. She resists for quite a while but finally gives in, because, frankly, she's lonely and bored... plus Lucky is fun to be around.

Apparently, Goldie and Kurt came together for real during the filming of Swing Shift.

In the background of the relationship developing between Kay and Lucky is the deeper relationship growing between Kay and Hazel, as friends. Imagine two independent, both economically—Kay's salary is more than what Jack is making in the Navy—and increasingly psychologically, women being able to form relationships on their own. Most of the women at MacBride experience the same sense of liberation, the confidence in their productive abilities as they master their jobs and the thrill of actually feeling as full persons in their own right. How heady... and scary. Hawn and Lahti should have won Oscars for their work in this film; there's more women's liberation in a choice scene from this movie than in the entire liturgy of NOW.

Naturally, when a human consciousness breaks out of the mold, i.e. rises above The Matrix of its time, countervailing forces are visited upon it. And WWII life in Southern California is no exception. There's conflict on this score for both women—Hazel is a striking and fashionable woman, with a great voice, but who has been spinelessly dependent on her ladies' man boyfriend Biscuits Touie (Fred Ward)— as they figure out the ethics of a new world. The playing of the love felt between Kay and Lucky is well-nuanced, as is the love that still remains between Kay and Jack. [Swing Shift is the next big movie for Ed Harris after The Right Stuff, and he fires on all cylinders in a role that really doesn't demand too much.]

This is a film for the Greatest Generation, a down-to-earth nonwar war movie about people struggling to deal with new things in a world turned upside down.[1] But for earlier Baby Boomers (b. 1946-1964) and Tweeners (b. 1928-1938?), the reminiscences cover the common experience Americans faced during the War, too. Add the modern theme of women's liberation and you have a real winner. [Many women from that era, including my mother and my two aunts, anticipated the watershed work of Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, long acknowledged as the founding document of the women's liberation movement. My mom and aunts all became professional women holding positions in education, medicine, and business that were previously the province of men. Like the blue-collar workforce of *Swing Shift*, they went through the swamp first, before the writers and intellectuals caught up with them.]

Anyway, great little movie, an entertaining tribute.

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[1] I have to put in my two cents about war at this point. The tendency, especially within my parents' generation, is to feel WWII was a 'just war.' I used to feel this way, too, until approximately two or three years ago when I fell in with all these peace people in the Free State... and started doing some revisionist reading. All one need do is read a handful of books (e.g. G. Edward Griffin's *The Creature from Jekyll Island*, Robert Stinnett's *Day of Deceit*, and many others) and learn the inside skinny and background of 911 Truth (or a host of other government treacheries): War is the health of the state... and it is always conducted for the benefit of the Kleptocons, particularly the banksters, who profit from war.

2008 May 30

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Swing Shift | *World War II* | *Rosie the Riveter* | *Women's Liberation*