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TCM THIS MONTH



SPOTLIGHT

Skyjacked



One of the first of many '70s disaster films, **Skyjacked** (1972) puts together what would soon become the traditional ensemble cast--former film and TV stars who are subjected to all kinds of horrific situations. In this case, passengers who think they're bound for Minneapolis are actually heading for the Iron Curtain, thanks to a deranged soldier, James Brolin (*Capricorn One*, 1978), who gives, quite possibly, the performance of his career (which isn't saying much). With Charlton Heston as the captain (of course), you know you're about to fly into one hell of an over-the-top drama. Yvette Mimieux (*Diamond Head*, 1963) is head stewardess and the captain's erstwhile lover, Walter Pidgeon is the senator, pro-footballer Roosevelt (Rosie) Grier is a cellist and Susan Dey (*The Partridge Family*, 1970-'74) is a hippie girl. It's a who's who of '70s pop culture--and they're all about to assume crash positions.

The film is a surprisingly suspenseful one and also delivers a number of surreal flashbacks from the vet's twisted mind that seem straight out of a Frank Tashlin (*The Girl Can't Help It*, 1956) film or a paranoid fantasy like *The Manchurian Candidate*, (1962). **Skyjacked's** director, John Guillermin, went on to do another key disaster film with *The Towering Inferno* (1974), but his knack for aerial photography was no doubt learned in large part on *The Blue Max* (1966).

Charlton Heston was finishing up the monumental *Antony and Cleopatra* (1973) when *The Omega Man* (1971) producer Walter Seltzer procured rights to the novel *Skyjacked*. In his autobiography *In the Arena*, Heston recounts the ensuing struggle with MGM: "They were reluctant to pay me my then standard percentile of first-dollar gross. (And after all I did for them on *Ben-Hur* [1959] too!) After a little arm-wrestle with the redoubtable Iceman [a nickname for a despised MGM executive], they gave in, and Walter proceeded with preproduction."

Heston would appear in several more disaster pics before the decade was up--*Airport '75* (1974), *Earthquake* (1974), and

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A veteran stage, film and TV actor for more than thirty years, Brian Dennehy gets to play favorites for a change in a 4-film lineup that includes James Mason in **Odd Man Out** (1947) and Albert Finney in **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** (1961).

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Midway (1976)--but at the time **Skyjacked** didn't fit into any established genre. On the heels of his Shakespearean epic, Heston was uncertain but hopeful about the quality of the new project, as seen in a journal he kept during shooting, excerpted here from *Charlton Heston: The Actor's Life, Journals 1956-1976*, edited by Hollis Alpert:

"January 4:I've never done a film with so many scenes I wasn't in. Still there was the 707, all becrewed and passengered. I did get a chance to try my uniform on. I look OK... January 5:My first scene today consisted of walking out of the cockpit and into the can. Very demanding bit of emoting there. January 20: The opening shots went well, John Guillermin utilizing his talent for richly textured full shots, most with a moving camera. He provided a good introductory scene for me. I'm beginning to realize this is not a rich role, of course. Nonetheless, if the film comes off, it'll help me. I'm beginning to think it will, too."

Though the acting challenges of **Skyjacked** don't appear overly taxing, the technical aspect of the shooting was. Heston recalls in his autobiography: "...shooting the film was a monstrous technical problem. Almost 90 percent of the movie took place inside a 707. (Yeah I know, Hitchcock shot all of *Lifeboat* [1944] in a lifeboat, but at least the *camera* didn't have to be inside it.)" Heston also had to learn how to look believable on that instrument panel and also spent several days in a simulator at LAX. The production used National Guard F-100's as stand-ins for the Soviet MIGS encountered by the beleaguered 707, which Heston recalls as believable and fast enough to give the cast and crew onboard a real-life thrill.

Heston's optimism for **Skyjacked** paid off. On his last journal entry for the shoot, he writes: "**Skyjacked** looks surprisingly good, I was relieved to see...It seems very tight. A pleasure for a change to be in a film that runs under two hours...it's been some time." And he's right. **Skyjacked** is solid escapist fare and raised the bar for disaster films several notches, although today, the same story would be treated in a radically different way. So sit back, fasten your seatbelts and remember a time when the captain smoked on the flight deck, pregnant women ordered Bloody Mary's and the worst that could be imagined was being hijacked to Moscow.

Producer: Walter Seltzer

Director: John Guillermin

Screenplay: Stanley R. Greenberg, based on a novel by David Harper

Cinematography: Harry Stradling, Jr.

Film Editing: Robert Swink

Art Direction: Edward C. Carfagno

Music: Perry Botkin, Jr.

Cast: Charlton Heston (Henry O'Hara), Yvette Mimieux (Angela Thacher), James Brolin (Jerome Weber), Claude Akins (Sgt. Ben Puzo), Jeanne Crain (Mrs. Clara Shaw), Susan Dey (Elly Brewster).

C-111m. Letterboxed. Closed captioning.

by Emily Soares



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