

we are, to believe in and express our talents. As Shilling says of his own life-work, "The only time I'm going to stop is when I'm dead."

Joyce Nelson

## Night Flight

d. Desmond Davis, sc. Alvin Goldman, ph. Paul van der Linden, ed. Ion Webster, sd. Henri Blondeau, sd. ed. Danuta Klis, sd. mix. Michel Deccombes, p. designer Bernard Durand, a.d. Bernard Durand, set dec. Reäl Ouellette, props Francis Calder, Herminio Bilhete, André Gagnon, m.d. André Gagnon, cost. Françoise Laplante, l.p. Trevor Howard, Bo Svenson, Celine Lomez, Ted Follows, exec. p. Lawrence F. Mihlon, p. Howard Ryshpan, Susan Lewis, p.c. Marlow Pictures Inc., (year0 1978, col. 35mm, running time 23 minutes, 55 seconds dist. The Singer Company and The Learning Corporation of America, a subsidiary of Columbia Films.

*Somewhere this plane would founder in darkness... Drowned by the night... Night's apple trees that wait upon the dawn with all their flowers that serve as yet no purpose. Night perfume-laden, that hides the lambs asleep and flowers that have no color yet.*

—Antoine de Saint Exupéry  
1932

**Night Flight** is the story of men who risked their lives or the lives of others to deliver the mail during the early days and nights of aviation. "Safety first was the obsession of those early days. Planes were to leave only an hour before dawn, to land only an hour after sunset," writes St. Exupéry.

In his novel, St. Exupéry develops two characters, Fabien, the pilot and Rivière, who sends his men into the depths of night, against the advice of others. His story is a classic. High school children read it in their 2nd year French classes. English majors read it in their Comparative Literature Studies. The prose of St. Exupéry is poetic.

"The night flights went on and on like a persistent malady,... help must be given to these men who with hand and knees and breast to breast were

wrestling with the darkness, who knew and only knew an unseen world of shifting things, whence they must struggle, out, as from an ocean."

What could a filmmaker do to recreate these words in a visual form? Almost an impossible task, one might say. One would first have to decide whether a poetic/dramatic film is possible. Peter Watkins was successful with **Edvard Munch**, but his film lasted almost three hours.

The photography is the most outstanding element of the film **Night Flight**. Cinematographer Paul van der Linden certainly deserves credit for this. **Night Flight** opens with a red sun-streaked sky. The image is captivating and as the titles appear, one suddenly notices a tiny biplane approaching from a far corner, creating a hypnotic effect. The viewer watches the vehicle as it grows against the sky. One is again entranced by the lovely image of a plane taking off at night, cradled by a fire-lit runway.

From a commercial point of view, the principal objection certainly would not be the slick 35mm presentation. The major problem with the film is its inability to evoke an emotional response from the audience. The film seems to need a touch of roughness to make the story believable. One wants to feel that the skies are treacherous. Black and white 16mm footage would have helped to create a rougher effect, but it was out of the question — artistic qualities are

important, but distribution values are godly.

Even the pilot Fabien (Bo Svenson) seems rather soft in character. The 20th Century exalts in presenting feminized-male roles. If one wants to establish the impression of a manly character, one does not always want to see an actor gazing dreamily from his comfortable bed or talking sweetly to his wife.

How does one create a dramatic context? How does one give a character depth? Fabien's personality is non-existent in the film. Who is he? The conflict seems to be that the film continually tries to take off in a dramatic direction, then in a romantic direction. Unfortunately the two directions fail to be integrated and the viewer goes up and down as often as the plane.

Superficially constructed scenes (man kisses wife goodbye at the airport) do not create substance. Buenos Aires, ostensibly the locale, does not become Buenos Aires just because a sign says so. (**Midnight Express** was shot in Malta and not in Sun Valley for this reason. And wives who sit around fireplaces thinking of their men makes one think of the old saying... sugar and spice and everything nice...

The Rock Hudson-Doris Day image of man and woman should have been circumvented by a slightly more realistic relationship (e.g. **The Glass Cell** by Geisendorfer). Perhaps a more realistic decision would have been to eliminate the female element altogether. The film



Fabien (Bo Svenson), a brave man who pilots night mail planes



## SHORT FILM REVIEWS

is only 23 minutes in length and only so much can be developed within that limited amount of time. This is a long standing problem with films that try to adhere to the story line of a book.

Without the false romance, the film would have been stronger. One deathly shot shows Celine Lomez (a wife who doesn't look very upset about the fact that her new husband may soon die) gazing out towards a lake. The film constantly tells — with a voice over narrative — rather than shows what one should feel.

The strongest moments of *Night Flight* occur during a perilous storm. A plane — a cloud ridden sky — solitude. And the most poetic moment transpires as the plane's fuel runs out, and it falls into the sky — an excellent finale — but unfortunately the film takes off again in another direction. Why? To destroy a poetic moment is certainly the worst artistic sin.

*Night Flight* has already played on CBS prime time. It has also been sold to NBC and ABC affiliates, and European markets are presently bidding for the film. As yet, CBC and CTV have not touched it.

The Singer Company spent as much on advertising *Night Flight* as they did

on the \$300,000 production. Marlow Pictures, Inc. headed by Howard Ryshpan and Susan A. Lewis, completed the film in two months, with 10 days of actual shooting at Cooper Airport in St. Lazare. The airplane appearing in *Night Flight* is a 50-year-old Curtiss Fledgling and was rented along with pilot Ken Bertch from Cole Palen of The Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome in Upper New York State for \$3500 and expenses.

Producer Howard Ryshpan is best known as an actor and director of theatre and for his work as first assistant director and casting director of *Lies My Father Told Me*. Susan Lewis recently worked on the film *Superman*.

*Night Flight* premiered in the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. It was a first class affair with dignitaries and heads of state in attendance as evidenced by the secret security guards. Their perfume company Guerlain, who originated the scent 'Vol de Nuit,' handed out elaborately enveloped samples of its product. And Howard Ryshpan thought, "They must think we live in some quaint townhouse in Montreal."

When the film was over, the \$20 used office supply furniture went back. Marlow Productions lives in a walk up

on Sherbrooke west. The only element of 'elegance' is the gold frame which circumscribes the *Night Flight* poster. So it goes with American sponsored Canadian productions.

Lois Siegel

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