

'The idea's an eagle, but film is a turkey'

By Chris McCubbin
Staff Reporter

'Nightflyers,' Plaza 4

First of all, "Nightflyers" is a great story. It's a hard science fiction/ghost story/fairy tale. This is a plot with everything — hauntings, possessions, lasers, giant space ships, a wicked queen and an enchanted prince, an intrepid band of adventurers, undead monsters, a mad wizard and a kindly old scientist — everything.

Movie Review

Based on a novella by George R.R. Martin, "Nightflyers" is a first-rate premise for a science fiction adventure. The story takes all sorts of neat effects from folklore, literature, religion and psychology, and gives them all a theoretically plausible scientific explanation. It has infinite potential.

However, "Nightflyers" is a pretty poor movie. The performances are lackluster, the pacing doesn't build and the script generates no excitement.

Nothing's really bad, you understand. The entire movie is determinedly, grimly competent. But nothing ever takes off, nothing shakes you, nothing, in short, that can even begin to live up to the infinite potential of the premise.

But some of the movie is quite good, really. The sets are beautifully designed for one thing. There are heavy borrowings from "Alien," but that's fine. Somebody managed to come up with a film that's often fascinating to look at, even when nothing fascinating is happening on the screen.

The violence is restrained and well photographed. There's a lot of carnage in this movie, but cheap

tricks like splatter and gore are used with restraint, sometimes even providing something resembling a genuine chill.

Actually, this is an infuriating movie.

It's too well done to hate it, but you can't really find any reason to like it.

Here's the plot. A research scientist assembles a team of young, attractive, well-dressed specialists to track down a race of starfaring immortals.

They rent a huge, opulently fitted freighter called the Nightflyer. Once aboard they discover that there's no crew, and the captain will only talk to them from a hologram, never in person.

Weird things begin to happen. People start to get hurt and killed. The Nightflyer's secrets are discovered, one by one, in a race against time.

It's indicative of my schizophrenic emotions about this movie that even though the plot develops turgidly, the plot developments themselves are interesting enough that I don't want to give them away.

Somebody, director, producer or whoever, just went the wrong direction with "Nightflyers," expending all their energy in exactly the wrong direction.

Remember the old "Star Trek" episodes? They were done with primitive special effects, on a low budget, with wildly implausible plots.

But the plots always made sense, on their own terms, and they started with a bang and they carried you along. The acting wasn't great, but it was likeable and animated.

Cheap. Dumb. Great.

So here's "Nightflyers," with its meticulous design and its state-of-the-art special effects and wonderful baroque plot.

The action puts you on the edge of your seat all right. And it puts your head on the back of your seat, and your eyelids slowly draw together. The characters drop like flies and you don't care.

Some of the blame for the movie's ennui can be laid at the door of Catherine Mary Stewart, "Nightflyers" narrator and heroine. There's something about most actresses today that makes it almost impossible to find a woman

who can play a character who's strong, active and competent without coming across as a cold fish or the great stone face. How much would it cost to clone Sigourney Weaver a few dozen times?

Michael Praed, as the ship's mysterious captain, is a pretty-boy wimp. Over the course of the movie he's supposed to grow into a hero, but Praed, and "Nightflyers," isn't up to that kind of character development.

The happiest find in this movie is pop singer Michael Des Barres as Winderman, a fey, half-mad professional telepath who comes to a grisly end. Des Barres makes an intriguing flash in "Nightflyers" dark night of characterization. I'm looking forward to his next adventure movie.

Maybe in 15, 20 or 30 years some really first-rate director of the future will pick up "Nightflyers" again and make a great movie out of this great concept. There's so much here that nothing is ever finished. It echoes of fairy tales, those earliest, earthiest, most fundamental parables for life in all its terror and beauty. Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and Cinderella all lurk in the shadows

but are never allowed to come into the light.

Classical references are also rife. The voyage home, the descent into hell, the succubus, the minotaur and the greatest potential

Oedipus complex ever put into a movie.

All of this is there in plain sight, fascinating, inert. The difference between "Nightflyers" as it should be and "Nightflyers" as it is, is all the difference between the play and the prop room.

Maybe, even if it was made as well as it could be made, "Nightflyers" could never be a hit. What does the average audience care about classical allusions and archetypal resonance?

The plot is big and strange. And let's face it, if the viewer has to think about what's happening, he'd probably much rather see something blow up.

Whatever its flaws,

"Nightflyers" is science fiction, and the movie-going public wants sci-fi. They want space battles and cute robots, or if they do want to be scared they want a big black penis with teeth to chase a girl in her underwear.

If you're a real science fiction fan, the kind who doesn't mind using your mind or your imagination, if you like to look beyond the familiar and the predictable, maybe you should see "Nightflyers." It will interest you and stimulate your imagination.

Just don't expect to have a lot of fun.

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Twenty Metropolitan Opera presentations will be broadcast live on KRNU radio station, FM 90.3, from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism beginning Dec. 5.

The broadcasts are sponsored by Texaco, Inc., and the Metropolitan Opera Radio Network.

Beginning at 1 p.m. every Saturday, these broadcasts are scheduled to be aired:

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- 5 — Puccini's "Tosca"
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- January
- 2 — Offenbach's "Les Contes d'Hoffman"
- 9 — Strauss' "Die Fledermaus"
- 16 — Wagner's "Das Rheingold"
- 23 — Verdi's "Macbeth"
- 30 — Debussy's "Pelleas et Meisande"

- February
- 6 — Verdi's "Luisa Miller"
- 13 — Puccini's "Turandot"
- 20 — Donizetti's "L'Elisir d'Amore"
- 27 — Verdi's "Otello"

- March
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- 12 — Strauss' "Ariadne auf Naxos"
- 19 — Wagner's "Die Walkuere"
- 26 — Mussorgorsky's "Khovan-shchina"

- April
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- 9 — Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte"
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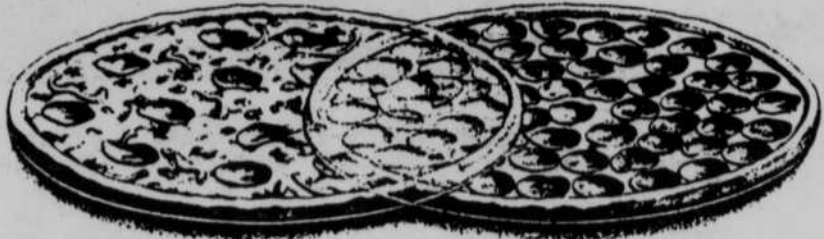
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