Snakes on a Plane

Talent: Nathan Phillips, Samuel L. Jackson, Julianna Margulies, Rachel Blanchard, Todd Louiso.

Date of review: Thursday 31st August, 2006.

Director: David Ellis
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 105 minutes
We rate it: Two and a half stars.

No, it’s not a mistake: that’s the film’s actual title. Snakes on a Plane takes two prizes this season: one for Title That Leaves Least To The Imagination, and one for Dumbest Movie of the Month. While it’s sporadically funny, Snakes on a Plane is lowest-common-denominator stuff indeed.

The most interesting thing about Snakes on a Plane is the fact that the film was significantly reworked before it was released, entirely as a result of the extraordinary level of interest in the film that had erupted on the internet as a result of the peculiar phenomenon of “blogging”. Blogs (or online diaries, for those of us who are over sixteen) are kept by the most fascinating people these days, including, in the case of Snakes on a Plane, Hollywood screenwriters. A writer who was at one time attached to the project described the experiences in his online journal, a journal that was read by many an avid fan and aspiring scriptwriter. Before anyone quite knew what was happening, a tornado of interest erupted around the project, interest that eventually resulted in the film’s producers making numerous significant changes to the film. A less in-your-face title was rejected, lines of dialogue were added in direct response to fan requests, reshoots were arranged, and more explicit violence and nudity was shot in order to tailor the film to a more “mature” audience. Please note the quotation marks.

The film’s story begins in Hawaii, where a young motorcyclist, Sean (played by Australia’s Nathan Phillips, fresh from his turn in Wolf Creek), witnesses a nasty gangland murder. Sean stumbles upon this gruesome killing, and makes his escape while the criminals are cleaning up. Of course the badguys somehow track Sean down, and come after him in an attempt to silence him for good. Enter tough FBI agent Samuel L. Jackson, whose character, Neville Flynn, rescues Sean from the...
villains and whisks him onto a plane bound for LA, where the young man will testify against the criminals. Once on the plane...well, you can guess the rest.

The point with horror-thrillers like this is not logic, so I won’t bore you with the hows and whys regarding the smuggling of the snakes onto the plane or the ways in which the reptiles are set upon the passengers. The point here is good old fashioned thrills and scares, and Snakes on a Plane provides the requisite number of both. The dialogue is pitched at the least demanding level throughout, presumably because the filmmakers understand that the last thing audiences will want here is wit or exposition. Jackson mouths some of his trademark coarse one-liners, and the rest of the cast, which includes Julianna Margulies and Rachel Blanchard, are left with utterly anaemic dialogue to spout, which they do with little enthusiasm. The snakes are almost all digitally animated, so while there is an element of the unnerving about the concept of poisonous animals running amok on a passenger plane at 30,000 feet, the scares only ever work at a certain level because the CGI is so clearly CGI-looking.

For undemanding horror junkies or for those whose interest has been piqued by the online hullabaloo, Snakes on a Plane might be mildly diverting. For those of us with - dare I say it - slightly more refined tastes in cinema, no amount of slither or hiss will make up for what the film lacks in, well, backbone.

Nick Prescott