

The Movies



LOUISE SNIDER



Super-patriotic motor pool mechanic Sgt. Tree (Dan Aykroyd) becomes commander of an M3 tank crew in Steven Spielberg's comedy spectacular "1941."

15-minute joke stretched out in spoof '1941'

Opening with an episode that spoofs his own big-grossing film "Jaws," Steven Spielberg's latest epic "1941" (PG) is a large-scale, largely disjointed comedy which ekes out its laughs in the first 15 minutes but doggedly carries on for another two hours.

The basic idea of the film shows promise. A lost Japanese submarine with an inept crew strays into Southern California waters a week after Pearl Harbor, setting off a wild chain of events.

Spielberg exhumes the old rumors and fears of a Japanese attack against the West Coast and inflates them to mass hysteria and paranoia, so that a screwball sighting escalates into an air raid on Los Angeles. What begins as a thin but workable comic springboard ends up crushed under the weight of spectacle.

The director doesn't miss a trick when it comes to special effects: a lighted ferris wheel rolling down a pier is one of several eye-catching sights. But if he has an aptitude for comedy, it doesn't show.

A FEW SCENES exhibit a quirky slapstick humor, but relies for laughs on easy targets — fat women, dumb army officers and a general population of boobs. In addition, there is a special category of scenes which rely for laughs solely on the appearance of John Belushi.

For some unfathomable reason, there are people who are triggered into bursts of laughter at the sight of Belushi, or better yet (worse yet), at the sight of Belushi doing something gross. Certainly, if you count yourself among these fans, "1941" is for you.

Also, if you just like to recall jitterbug contests, zoot suits and Walt Disney's "Dumbo," "1941" will do it for you. However, it is not a nostalgic film. If anything, it satirizes the era.

In one episode, a tank commander (in Los Angeles) gives an inspirational speech to a crowd of brawling soldiers, sailors and marines. It's a "let's all pull together and fight the enemy, not ourselves" type of speech.

There is nothing hilarious about it. But Spielberg intends it as a funny poke at patriotic oratory. The joke not only falls flat but lands with a clunk. December 1979 is the wrong moment in American can history to make fun of patriotism.

WHEN SPIELBERG directed "Jaws," his subject and timing were perfect. The same is true for "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" when he took advantage of the "Star Wars" phenomenon. But with "1941," his timing failed him completely.

When everyone from room mothers to the President of the United States is exhorting Americans to show unity of purpose and spirit, Spielberg's deflation of national pride goes over like steak tartare at a vegetarian banquet.



At the Hollywood U.S.O. (from left), Miss Fitzroy (Penny Marshall) lectures her girls, including Betty (Dianne Kay) and Maxine (Wendie Jo Sperber) on wartime conduct.

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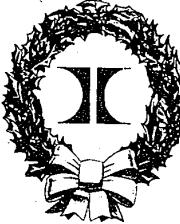
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