

# Airplane!

By Michael Schlesinger

In most people's minds, the 1970s break neatly in two. The first half was the so-called Silver Age of Hollywood, when a new generation of directors arose and put their stamp on the movies: Scorsese, Coppola, DePalma, Friedkin and others made ambitious, rule-breaking films that seemed to spell the end of the vaunted studio system (save Peter Bogdanovich, who made traditional pictures in a modern way). But a funny thing happened on the way to auteur nirvana: two other New Kids inadvertently killed the silver goose, and by the time the dust settled, Spielberg and Lucas were the new white-haired boys, and the studios were back in the blockbuster business for good.

Yet what most people forget is that big money was already being hauled in throughout the decade by an exceedingly old-fashioned genre: the disaster film. George Seaton's good-natured "Airport" made a killing in 1970, but it was considered a one-off throwback. Then two years later, Irwin Allen launched "The Poseidon Adventure," and gathering up a bunch of stars and making most of them die horribly became an actual thing; in short order studios were all trying to top each other with such epics as "Earthquake," "The Towering Inferno" and "When Time Ran Out," as well as three increasingly silly "Airport" non-sequels and, yes, "Beyond the Poseidon Adventure." By decade's end, people had gotten fed up. "The Big Bus" had deftly mocked the trend, but it came too early. The time was finally ripe for the killshot.

It came, oddly, from Wisconsin. Brothers Jerry and David Zucker and pal Jim Abrahams had struck gold with "Kentucky Fried Movie," a film version of their zany stage show, featuring several sketches spoofing movies. Hollywood beckoned, so they decided to think bigger. Remembering 1957's "Zero Hour!", one of several plane-in-jeopardy thrillers made in the wake of Willam Wellman's smash "The High and the Mighty," they acquired the remake rights for a meager \$2500, wrote a parody script (perhaps not in that order) and, teamed with producer Jon Davison, got a nibble from Paramount—the very studio that released



Stewardess Julie Hagerty and erstwhile pilot Robert Hays in the cockpit of the doomed 'Airplane!' Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

"Zero Hour!" (Davison avers this was totally a coincidence.) The brass liked it yet were skeptical, but legendary producer Howard W. Koch "got" it and volunteered to come aboard. With that reassurance and a reasonable \$3.5 million budget, Michael Eisner gave them the green light.

It didn't begin smoothly. ZAZ, as they were called, wanted dramatic actors not known for comedy, who would deliver the goofy dialogue perfectly seriously; Paramount thought this was bonkers and wanted folks like Harvey Korman and Dom DeLuise. The boys prevailed, and soon enlisted Peter Graves, Lloyd Bridges, Robert Stack and Leslie Nielsen; all but the latter initially passed (Stack, who'd co-starred in the Wellman film, thought it would never make a dime—"shows you what I know"), but their families convinced them to surrender to the lunacy. On the other hand, Nielsen, at heart a comic, was thrilled to finally display his silly side. For the young leads, they signed TV actor Robert Hays and newcomer Julie Hagerty, then added lots of familiar faces, some in off-beat cameos, such as Barbara Billingsley as a passenger who "speaks jive" and Ethel Merman as a shell-shocked soldier who thinks he's Ethel Merman.

True, the rickety sets and shaky effects betray the budget, yet they add to the film's garage-band charm. Besides, the gags come so relentlessly you seldom notice. Of course, some of that was deliberate, such as the process backgrounds that keep changing, or the jet that makes the sound of propellers (a compromise between the boys, who wanted to use a prop plane, and Eisner, who nixed it). And a few snips had to be made to get a PG (though a flash of bare

breasts came through unscathed). They were also fortunate to hire renowned D.P. Joseph Biroc, a fast set-lighter who kept them on schedule, and none other than Elmer Bernstein, whose overly-serious score fell right in line with the deadpan performances.

Although some plot points and lines came from other films (hard to believe, but all three swear they had *never* seen “From Here To Eternity” when they shot the beach scene), most of it was pure “Zero Hour!”, from character names to almost verbatim dialogue with an added punchline, most memorably: “Surely you can’t be serious.” “I *am* serious—and don’t call me Shirley,” which has endured as an all-purpose retort. And the original’s casting of football great Elroy “Crazy Legs” Hirsch as the co-pilot inspired Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in the same role. (First choice Pete Rose was busy playing baseball.) In fact, it follows poor “Zero” so closely that today it can no longer be watched with a straight face; when Sterling Hayden mutters, “Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit smoking,” audiences invariably crack up, remembering Bridges’ running variations on the line all through “Airplane!” (It also suffers from a fervent opening narration by William Conrad, which immediately puts us in a moose-and-squirrel mindset.)

But most people weren’t aware of the original, and certainly didn’t care. The endless barrage of jokes-jokes-jokes, many tucked in the background a la Mad Magazine, slayed ‘em in a way few pictures had of late. In its first two days, it grossed its entire budget; by week’s end it was comfortably in the black and ended up at about \$85 million, making it the fourth-largest grossing film of 1980. Audiences were tickled by the sight of serious actors so far out of their comfort zone, and most critics were too, though here and there complaints arose about “bad taste”—though by today’s standards it’s less vulgar than the average network sitcom (well, except for those boobs). And the endless japes about race, religion and sexuality—especially in the absurdly gay airport hand played by Stephen Stucker—were so good-natured that you’d really have to strain yourself to be offended. (Interestingly, a later “New Yorker” article traced the rise of Political Correctness via the reduction of such gags from “Airplane!” through later ZAZ films. Like “Blazing Saddles,” it could not be made today as is.)

Naturally, Paramount wanted a sequel. The boys felt they’d be repeating themselves, so the studio went ahead and made “Airplane II: The Sequel” without

them to so-so returns. Meanwhile, they moved to TV with “Police Squad!”, starring Nielsen; the cop show parody lasted six episodes before ABC axed it. They returned to features with “Top Secret!” a Cold War spy spoof; reviews were good, but released in the same month as “Ghostbusters,” “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” “Gremlins,” “Star Trek III” and “The Karate Kid,” it simply got lost in the melee. But they were back on top with “The Naked Gun,” a feature version of “Police Squad!” It was a critical and commercial hit and spawned two sequels.

Nevertheless, “Airplane!” was less an arrival than a departure, an almost last hurrah for the traditional vaudeville humor that dominated show biz for nearly a century. The face of comedy was changing: Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Larry Gelbart and Neil Simon reduced their output; Woody Allen turned serious; Blake Edwards, unable to find another Peter Sellers, became erratic, and Jerry Lewis was sidelined with health issues. The rise of “Saturday Night Live,” plus the huge success of raunchy teen comedies like “Porky’s,” showed that younger folks cared less about a well-made film than gobs of sex jokes and toilet gags—the rawer, the better. For every new-generation comedy that worked, such as “Animal House,” there were a dozen that stunk. But they mostly made money, and the trio now seemed as old-fogeyish as its predecessors. (Brooks once sagely noted, “We mock the thing we are to be.”) Jerry saw the writing on the wall and moved to drama, notably the wildly-successful “Ghost,” while David and Jim separately hung in as long as they could. But it was never the same.

Still, “Airplane!” continues to delight us, recalling a more innocent time when “let’s knock ‘em dead” was the mantra. And the greatest irony of all: Though that style of comedy has yet to return, guess what *has* made a comeback? That’s right: The Disaster Film. But as San Andreas might have said, “That’s not my fault.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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