

Joe Versus the Volcano ★★★

Year of Release: 1990

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Joe Versus the Volcano is the most frustrating kind of movie. You watch most of it with a dopey grin on your face, loving every minute of it, but you end up leaving the theater frowning and scratching your head. The reason? The first two thirds of the film are virtually perfect. But just when you think the movie can do no wrong, it pulls the rug out from under you, self-destructs, and dissolves into a sloppy mess. Writer-director John Patrick Shanley has created two thirds of a four star classic.

The movie stars Tom Hanks as Joe Banks, a hypochondriac who always feels miserable. Joe works as an advertising librarian in a hideous office, which is located deep in the bowels of a surgical parts factory. His boss is a dunce, the work is boring, the coffee is putrid, and the fluorescent lights create a blinding glare. In short, Joe's life is incredibly grim, and it goes from bad to worse when a doctor tells him he has a "brain cloud," a rare condition which will kill him within six months. Joe quits his crummy job, and the very next day a rich tycoon, played by Lloyd Bridges, comes a knockin' on his door with an unusual offer. He wants to hire Joe to jump into a volcano on a small island in the Caribbean. Joe has nothing to lose so he accepts the offer.

After Hanks' dismal outings in *The Burbs* and *Turner & Hooch*, *Joe Versus the Volcano* comes as a breath of fresh air. Like *Punchline*, *Volcano* taps into Hanks' somber side and offers him a substantial character: someone who has lost his spirit and who comes to life only after he learns that he's dying. Joe is one of Hanks' more intriguing roles, and consequently *Volcano* is easily one of the actor's better films.

Volcano, however, really belongs to Meg Ryan, who seems more and more polished with each movie. Ryan plays three vastly different characters, and she is enchanting in each one. First, wearing a brown wig and brown lenses, she plays DeDe, a dizzy secretary who works with Joe. Second, sporting a red wig and red lipstick, she

plays Angelica, Bridges' snobby, neurotic daughter. Third, she plays Angelica's half-sister, Patricia, a blond blue-eyed beauty. First, Ryan looks like Ally Sheedy, then like Molly Ringwald, and finally like herself. But it's not just Ryan's make-up that changes: it's her mannerisms, her body language, and the way she talks. Ryan plays each part with flair and conviction.

Until the disappointing finale, *Volcano* brings to mind films like *After Hours* and *Something Wild*. It shares with those movies a timeless, otherworldly quality and a pungent satirical tone. As in any great black comedy, every character is colorful; every actor seems perfectly cast. For example, Ossie Davis turns up as a sophisticated limo driver who takes Joe on a massive shopping spree in Manhattan. The grave luggage salesman they encounter is a riot.

Volcano is most memorable, however, not for its performances but for its production design. For example, the opening sequence, which takes us into Joe's work-place, is a masterpiece of surrealism. The surgical parts factory is a nightmarish dungeon, complete with endless stairs, clunky machines, and glaring fluorescent lights. *Volcano* is Shanley's directorial debut (he previously wrote *Moonstruck*, *Five Corners*, and *The January Man*), and his direction is surprisingly confident and stylish.

The problem is that an hour into the film, the bottom falls out of Shanley's script, and the movie takes a nose dive. *Volcano* begins as an intelligent satire and ends as a silly comic book. The movie really falls apart once Joe reaches the volcanic island, which is inhabited by natives who worship Orange Soda; their chief is played by Abe Vigoda of all people. It's as if Shanley didn't know how to end the story; the tacky finale seems as if it were written by someone else, by a hack. It just doesn't feel right. How can a movie so extraordinarily good become so exceedingly awkward? Blame Shanley: he rows the movie up a creek and then throws away the paddle.