

Swing Shift ★★★

Year of Release: 1984

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

I rented *Swing Shift* with mixed expectations since it opened theatrically to mediocre reviews. However, my admiration for the film's star, Goldie Hawn, and director, Jonathan Demme, were more than enough to overcome my hesitation.

Swing Shift is a fairly good, but somewhat insubstantial, stateside World War II drama. On one level, the film concerns the invasion of women into the work force during the war. On another level, *Swing Shift* is a simple and sweet love story. Unfortunately, the film does not fully realize either of these two themes, as it treats both rather superficially.

Hawn stars as an unambitious housewife whose husband enlists in the navy after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. To make ends meet and to fill her time, Hawn goes to work for an airplane factory, where she is subject to relentless courtship from her foreman, played by Kurt Russell. Hawn gives a strong and credible performance as a woman who is torn between her devotion to her husband on the one hand and her loneliness and attraction to her suitor on the other. Hawn's character in *Swing Shift* is much deeper than the cutesy, air-headed roles she usually plays. As she matures from a naive and subservient housewife to a confident and assertive factory forewoman, Hawn's performance always rings true.

As Hawn's suitor and eventual lover, Russell is charming and sympathetic in perhaps the most convincing performance of his career. Russell seems like a real person in *Swing Shift*, whereas in other movies—such as *Big Trouble in Little China* and *Overboard*—he has seemed one dimensional. Moreover, the chemistry between Hawn and Russell in *Swing Shift* is much more potent than it was

in *Overboard*, a film in which they were hampered by an uneven script. In fact, Hawn and Russell reportedly fell in love while making *Swing Shift* and have been an off-screen couple ever since, which suggests that their romance in this film may not be entirely a performance.

Swing Shift is not especially plot-intensive so it must succeed or fail on the strength of its characters and acting. I think it does so on both accounts. All the characters, including the supporting ones, seem genuine. The strong World War II flavor and atmosphere that Demme brings to the screen is also noteworthy. Unfortunately, *Swing Shift* is not terribly profound. The movie does not provide any fresh insights into the predicament of working women during and after the war. Nor does it shed any light onto illicit and adulterous love, the other major theme of *Swing Shift*. Nevertheless, I was able to enjoy *Swing Shift* for what it is: a film with memorable and sympathetic characters, but one lacking in substance and lasting emotional impact.

Most critics, despite their lukewarm response to *Swing Shift*, highly praised Christine Lahti's performance—as Hawn's strong willed friend—and singled her out as the main reason to see the film. Her acclaimed performance, however, did not particularly impress me. She plays the character well enough, but I don't think she is any more effective than is Hawn, Russell, or the rest of the fine cast. A final noteworthy bit of trivia about *Swing Shift* is that then-unknown Holly Hunter has about a minute of screen time as one of the women in Hawn's circle of co-workers. Needless to say, any movie featuring both Goldie Hawn and Holly Hunter cannot be without its merits.