

## Dark Blue World

*Dark Blue World*, from the Czech Republic begins in a 1950 Czechoslovakian labor camp, where Franta Slama (Ondrej Vetchy) has been consigned as an “enemy of the people” for flying with the Royal Air Force during WWII. We then flash back to 1939, where two Czech air force pilots, veteran Franta and trainee Karel Vojtisek (Krystof Hadek) lose their calling when the Nazis invade and take over their air field. Anxious to fight the invaders, the two escape their homeland and, with other Czech flyers, make it to England where they hope to form an emigre force within the RAF. Their itch for action is delayed while Wing Commander Bentley (Charles Dance) insists that they need more training before they can fly into harm’s way.

Finally, the Czech air contingent is called for missions over the English Channel. On one of them, young Karel’s plane is shot down, and, though Franta thinks he perished, Karel bails out and arrives at the rural cottage of an Englishwoman named Susan (the luminous Tara Fitzgerald), whose officer husband is away at war. Susan tends to Karel’s wounds (and, in a moment of weakness, to his libido also), and Karel understandably falls for her. When Karel gets back to base, Franta is thrilled that his friend is alive, and eventually the two go to see Susan. But she ultimately falls for the mature, intriguing Franta, and the two begin their own affair. Karel learns of the liaison, and, furious, rejects his friend and mentor. On a later run escorting bombers, Franta is shot down in the English Channel, and Karel tries to save him with tragic results. Franta later comes to realize that he will be unable to stay with Susan...

The above synopsis has elements that might remind one of another--much more hyped--film of last year about World War II flyboys--one of whom was missing in action--attracted to the same woman. Remember *Pearl Harbor*? Many reviewers thought the love story of that mega-movie was tedious and lame (including this one). I thought *Dark Blue World’s* depiction of a similar triangle is far more real, touching, and emotionally affecting than the mawkish blockbuster. The camaraderie between the men, the honest display of their emotions, the authenticity of their combat surroundings (including British pilots flying period Spitfires and bombers) all combine to form a convincing whole.

*Dark Blue World* is director Jan Sverak’s long time dream for a Czech film epic about that war. Sverak is known to audiences worldwide through his film *Kolya* (1997), which he made with his father Zdenek Sverak, who wrote and starred in that Academy Award-winning picture (Sverak pere also wrote the solid screenplay for *Dark Blue World*). This film, much more elaborate than *Kolya* in terms of sweep and dramatic effects, cost ten times the usual Czech feature (with financing mainly coming from West European sources) yet still saved money by avoiding location shooting in England; virtually the entire film was shot in the Czech Republic. Even a classic English-type cottage (once owned by a member of the Rothschild family) was found to stand in for Susan’s country house. The care and craft of the production combined with its very human drama mark the whole enterprise, making *Dark Blue World* evoke both the genuine flavor of WWII movie dramas as well as the spirit of the best romances of that

epoch.

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