

## Apollo 13

*Apollo 13*, the new megamovie from director Ron Howard, diligently recreates the true-life journey of the hapless moon mission of April 1970. *Apollo 13* (at theaters all over town) is a real popcorn movie--large bag size.

It operates almost like a parabolic flight plan itself, opening gradually with slow-moving domestic and training scenes, picking up with the launch, hitting its apogee with disaster aboard, then tumbling home again with the astronauts as Mission Control hastens to save them. The film depicts the Apollo crew as rather ordinary men in an extraordinary situation, working Joes just doin' a job, the job that just happens to be a moon shot in an office that just happens to be a space capsule.

Howard has again, as in earlier films (*Parenthood, Backdraft, The Paper*), a large ensemble cast. To humanize this cast within the (somewhat chilly) space program, he focuses on the home lives of the astronauts, especially Apollo 13 captain James Lovell (Tom Hanks) and his wife Marilyn (Kathleen Quinlan). To add drama, he also trots out in-flight resentments between the other crew members, Jack Swigert (Kevin Bacon) and Fred Haise (Bill Paxton). But the vaunted Hanks and the other actors are unable to develop rounded characters; they are all servants of the relentless plot and the astral hardware. The one actor who attains a richness of character against the odds is Ed Harris as Gene Franz, the square-jawed, single-minded director of Mission Control.

Howard had unprecedented access to and assistance from NASA, and it shows, especially in the film's technical believability. In a way, his experience parallels that of critic/author Tom Wolfe, whose similar exposure to NASA produced his encomium to the space agency "The Right Stuff." The director also tries to deepen the implications of his story (based on astronaut Lovell's biographical "Lost Moon") by showing how moonshots became routine and lost their wonder, a wonder he, taken with the program, still wants audiences to feel. This is most apparent when he has his spacemen, though mired in distress, still gawk at the glorious view from their capsule.

*Apollo 13* is, above all, an efficient entertainment machine, with emphasis on the machine. It is big, often noisy, shiny, full of buttons and switches, processes and codes. It doesn't really deal in suspense--since we know how it comes out--but rather in tension, in which it excels. It is also long--you should have time to reach the grannies at the bottom of your popcorn bag.

*("Apollo 13" is rated "PG.")*

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