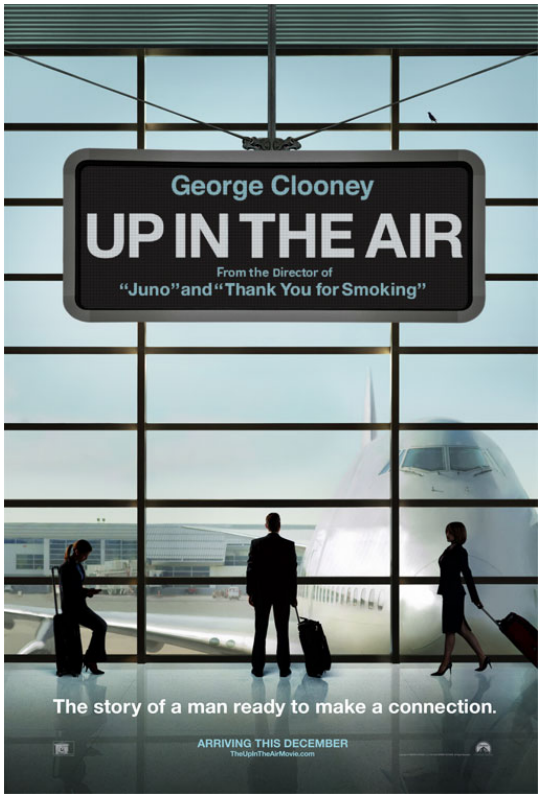

We continue our run-up to Oscar week by looking back at "Up in the Air". This film was the early favorite of critics as the Best Picture of the year, but has seemingly ran out of steam against the much talked about David vs Goliath battle between "Avatar" and "The Hurt Locker". Which is a shame, as I still personally feel that this is the best movie of the year. George Clooney is also deserving of Best Actor award that he'll probably lose to Jeff Bridges, and Vera Farminga and Anna Kendrick will split their votes for Best Supporting Actress, allowing Moniqu'e to easily win the award.

Awards aside, this movie comes out next Tuesday to DVD, and I will certainly add it to my collection the very first day, and will enjoy watching it again and again. It is that good, and that relevant to the world we live in today.

Expectations are the worst thing in the life of a movie critic. Despite my "attempts" at remaining neutral, I almost always go into a film with my expectations pre-set. Often, it is to prepare myself to be disappointed, so that I can concentrate a little more on acting, character development, and chemistry...things that can often make a mediocre movie much better". The worst is when I go in with very high expectations...movies that are already being touted as "serious Oscar contenders". Too often, these movies fall flat in my book. Maybe it was because my expectations were unrealistic; "Million Dollar Baby", "No Country for Old Men", and "Milk" fall into that category. Other times, the movie just isn't that good...after which I get really

snippy about my disappointment. "Atonement" and "The Reader" are two recent examples of that.

So here I go into the theater to see "Up in the Air". The critics are raving about it. It's written and directed by Jason Reitman, who is becoming a major star in his own right after the wonderful films "Thank You for Smoking" and "Juno", and it's starring George Clooney, one of my favorite actors, in a role that is being said to be worthy of a sure fire Oscar nominations. As you can see, my anxiety was high that this film couldn't possibly be that good.

It was.

"Up in the Air" is the best film I have seen this year; a story so well told, so brilliantly acted, filled with so much heart and soul, and so topical that it can even beat out the incredible "Wow!" factor of James Cameron's magnificent "Avatar".

Give credit to Reitman for being lucky as well as good. Filming on this movie began well before the economy really started going into the tank in late 2008. So due to the unfortunate economic conditions, this subject of this movie ends up being 100% perfect for late 2009.

The Subject is losing your job, and the rejection, depression, fears, and all the other multitudes of demoralizing emotions that go with it. But this movie is not shown through the eyes of the people being let go; its viewpoint is that of the people doing the dirty work of shattering people's lives and dreams.

Ryan Bingham (Clooney) is such a shark. He is hired by companies to come in and handle the unpleasant task of looking people in the eyes and telling them that they are not wanted, nor needed. Ryan explains in a voice over that he is hired because the executives of the company are too spineless to do the deed themselves. A very accurate statement, as those of us in the corporate world know too well.

But rather than portray Ryan as a heartless cretin who makes a very substantial living off the misery of others, he is shown as a man who has a personality not unlike a successful undertaker; he is talented at showing the right amount of compassion to those let go, without getting either too sentimental or too condescending. He realizes that his job is to take people out and throw them off the boat in the middle of the ocean, but he still tries to give them

encouragement to begin the process of rebuilding their shattered lives. "Anyone who has ever accomplished great things has done so because they once sat in the same chair you are sitting in now" is one of his favorite lines...and it may even be true...but it is one of the tactics he uses to accomplish his goals; getting people out the door without them causing a huge scene.

Ryan's job allows him to enjoy a lifestyle that is peculiarly perfect for him; avoiding any real emotional interaction with anyone. He is on the road 325 days a year, sleeping in hotels, eating alone at the best restaurants, and enjoying casual affairs whenever they may pop up (and with someone with Ryan's looks and charms, the opportunity pops up a lot). He hates it when he is back at his "home", which is nothing more than a sparsely furnish efficiency he stays at for a few miserable days at a time before he jumps back on a plane.

Ryan's only major goal in life is to become the youngest person to ever obtain the magic mark of ten million frequent flyer miles. Nothing else is really important to him; a fact that is re-enforced by his part-time job/hobby; being a motivational speaker. Ryan's message? Empty your "backpack" of all material and emotional bonds. Relationships are "the heaviest components in your life, and they slow you down. The slower we move, the faster we die". Emotional detachment is a near religion to him, and he is the most ardent practitioner of it.

Of course, things must happen to cause such a man to re-evaluate his choices in life, and these events are caused by three very unique women.

First comes Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga); a woman that shares the exact lifestyle and outlook on life as Ryan. They meet up at a bar, and within minutes they are comparing "Preferred Member" cards, and within a few hours they are in bed together. Ryan has never met a female version of himself before, and he is totally smitten with Alex...but has absolutely no idea what to do with his feelings. No matter, he only gets to see her for a few hours or perhaps a day or two once every few months, so everything is "perfect".

Things become complicated back at the Omaha corporate office when Ryan's boss Craig (a perfectly smarmy Jason Bateman) introduces him to a 23 year old pint-sized apple cart destroyer named Natalie (Anna Kendrick). Natalie, fresh out of a high level business school, has came up with the idea of having Ryan and other "terminators" use teleconferencing technology to perform their dirty work...a change that could permanently ground Ryan. Of course, Ryan is not happy with the decision, and is even less thrilled when Craig instructs him to take Natalie out on the road for a few months so that she may learn the ins and outs of the

business.

The final bit of angst that hits Ryan is dealing with the upcoming wedding of his kid sister. As you could guess, Ryan isn't much of a big brother, but is goaded by his other sister to make the effort to show up in snowy northern Wisconsin to attend the ceremony.

The beauty of this film is in the characters, and the way they relate to one another. No one is a stereotype (other than maybe Jason Bateman's character...but it's a pretty small part). Natalie is a walking contradiction of herself, which leads to several hilarious moments, and a few heartbreaking ones as well. Anna Kendrick was only known to me as the high school friend of Bella in the "Twilight" movies, and it was surprising to see her play a "grown-up", and to do it so well.

Vera Farmiga's performance as Alex was a complete shock to me. I last saw her in a major serious role as the psychiatrist in "The Departed", and I frankly thought she was the weakest actor in the film; too overmatched by the likes of DiCaprio and Damon, and not that believable in the part. But as Alex, she is simply amazing...a woman who is completely comfortable with her life as she approaches 40, and not a bit shy about what she wants. Because of this, she could easily come across as heartless, but Farmiga doesn't allow that to happen, as she shows the weariness and sadness of Alex, along with the longing for something more, a trait that she seems to share with Ryan.

The movie, however, belongs to George Clooney, and he delivers what I think is the best performance of his career in a leading role (which is saying something, given his performance in "Michael Clayton"). It would be easy to hate a person like Ryan Bingham, but thanks to Clooney's thoughtful portrayal, you don't. Ryan is never really a jerk...just an emotionally repressed man who is good at doing a job no one should want to do. You end up sympathizing with him...but not too much, as you can see that many of Ryan's problems are self made, and you want to go up and slap him in the face to get him to snap out of it. In other words, Ryan is a fully developed, three dimensional character, and Clooney simply nails the part.

All of this works together seamlessly in Reitman's crisp, intelligent script that is frequently quite funny, but always completely honest with the subject matter and the people involved. It is a clever script for adults, one that never takes the expected or easy way out. Make no mistake; this is not a Romantic Comedy. It is about real people dealing with real issues...but is still highly entertaining and fun to watch, even with the more somber sub-plots.

One nice touch was that Reitman cast people who had recently lost their jobs in cameo roles as people fired by Ryan or Natalie, and despite not being professional actors, their pain, frustration, and shock from their real-life firings shine through on the screen. Reitman also uses three real actors for longer, more intense scenes, with Zach Galifianiakis, Steve Eastin, and J.K. Simmons each getting one great scene to show off their acting chops as terminated employees.

Simmons' scene is especially moving, as it is one of the first where Natalie tries to "smooth over" a man livid at being tossed to the curb after 20 years' devoted service. As "Bob" becomes angrier at her cluelessness, Ryan steps in, and talks to Bob about his younger years when Bob studied briefly to be a chef...but tossed that dream aside for the larger paycheck. Ryan's speech to Bob about using this opportunity to finally pursue his dreams was quite touching, and while we as an audience know that Ryan was giving that speech just to calm the man down, you could tell that he still meant what he said.

That is the beauty of this film. While the movie focuses on Ryan's attempt to keep the rest of the world at a distance, it ends up showing how important it is to focus on the people around you, and your relationships with them. In a world where job security is non-existent, and where all the self-esteem that has been built up by your job and your career can be ripped away in a moment, we must keep in mind the things that really matter.

When you walk away from this film, you will be thinking about those things, and how they relate in your life, long after you leave the theater.

My Rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs).