

Films deal with conflicts, but never get off the ground

NEW YORK (CNS) — A romantic, old-fashioned combat movie, "Fire Birds" (Touchstone) is updated to reflect the government's war on drug-trafficking.

Ace Army pilot Jake Preston (Nicolas Cage) is sent to the ultimate fighter-pilot training school to perfect his air-to-air helicopter combat techniques. He is determined to be chosen for the mission to get Stoller — the South American drug cartel's No. 1 fighter pilot. Stoller killed Jake's buddy, and his stunning success has enabled the cartel to flourish.

But first Jake must win over his instructor Brad (Tommy Lee Jones), who has mixed feelings about Jake replacing him as the Army's best combat flier.

Brad pushes him to the limit, but when Jake is nearly dropped from the program, his ex-girlfriend, Billie (Sean Young), intervenes. A pilot herself, she abhors Jake's sexist ways but can't quite resist his renewed overtures.

After some soul-searching, Billie and Brad help Jake overcome a vision problem, and the three are assigned to Operation Fire Bird, where they take out Stoller in an opulent display of fast-paced firepower.

Director David Green propels the far-fetched storyline forward with crackerjack aerial photography. In fact, backed by inspirational marching music, the air training and combat scenes become the film's centerpiece since Jake's success, renewed romance and the enemy's demise are foregone conclusions.

The three leads turn in highly sympathetic performances as they rehash familiar themes — youth vs. age, male vs. female. Despite Jake's cockiness, the au-



Michael Paris-Touchstone Pictures
Chief Warrant Officer II Jake Preston (Nicolas Cage) prepares for his dangerous mission in Touchstone Pictures' "Fire Birds."

dience comes to root for him when he develops enough sensitivity to recognize his instructor is coping with a midlife crisis.

Billie is dedicated to her career as a pilot, with all its inherent risks, and in rekindling her relationship with Jake she forces him to accept her equal right to follow a dream.

The helicopter scenes are exciting, even dizzying, with the final showdown requiring concentration just to keep score and understand the dialogue, which is sometimes lost in the mounting firepower.

The film's simplistic conclusion, in which one military mission effectively cripples the drug cartel's operation,

trivializes the reality of the drug problem, but will be appreciated by action fans.

Because of extremely violent combat scenes, an extended scene built around double entendres and a fairly restrained bedroom scene, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Torn Apart'

Lacking the dramatic intensity of its title, "Torn Apart" (Castle Hill) retells the Romeo-and-Juliet story with the Arab/Israeli conflict as its scenic backdrop.

When little Laila's Palestinian family moves next door to Ben's Jewish home in Israel, the two children become fast friends and promise to remain so always.

The Six Day War in 1967, however, prompts Ben's family to relocate to New York, and Laila never discovers the farewell note he leaves her under their favorite rock.

Six years later, Ben (Adrian Pasdar) has been drafted into the Israeli army, and a

chance encounter with Laila (Cecilia Peck), who is now an idealistic schoolteacher, seals their fates. Despite the fierce objections of both families, and their own opposing views, they fall in love.

Ben, meanwhile, faces military discipline for allowing his machine gun to be stolen when he drops it on the beach to rescue a drowning Arab boy, and the weapon eventually is used to kill other Israeli soldiers.

Knowing they cannot live peacefully together in Israel, Laila reluctantly agrees to flee her beloved homeland with Ben, who will be branded as a deserter. Captured en route, Laila is caught in the cross fire between Israeli soldiers and Arab protesters.

Director Jack Fisher's feature film debut is marred by weak narrative, clumsy flashback devices and a decidedly superficial treatment of the characters.

The film, however, is visually beautiful, taking full advantage of the authentic Israeli scenery to sustain interest.

Ben and Laila never really spring to life beyond their role as symbols of their two peoples and so their danger-drenched affair carries no immediacy. Peck, in her first starring role, and the intense Pasdar are good, but they cannot ignite a flat script.

In one of the few thought-provoking moments in the film, a liberal professor tries to impart some understanding of the Arab culture to Ben, but otherwise the differences between Arabs and Jews living in Israel are given short shrift. Much more time is needlessly spent on Ben and Laila's families and friends, who come to regard the doomed couple as traitors.

Pacing is so ponderous that the film's tragic climax, never in doubt, is bland rather than moving.

Ben and Laila could be star-crossed lovers anywhere; their divergent philosophies and the political realities that engulf them are given such a surface once-over they could just as easily be from Catholic and Protestant families in Belfast.

Due to intermittent scenes of bloodshed and violence, and a restrained scene of sexual passion, the U.S.C.C. classification is A-III — adults. The M.P.A.A. rating is R — restricted.

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