

Loud, long and energetic

FILM

Independence Day

IF YOU believe all of the hype about *Independence Day*, by the time you read this review a good percentage of the world will have viewed this film. And most of the rest will know at least the basic outline of the plot. So let's separate some fact from fiction.

Independence Day is a big-budget special effects science fiction film about (preventing) the end of the world directed (and co-written) by German-born Roland Emmerich, whose 1994 sci-fi film, *Stargate* stunned the film world with its success. *Independence Day* is loud, long, energetic, handsomely produced, frequently funny and carefully crafted. You could call it *Top Gun* meets *Star Wars*, or a remake of *War of the Worlds*. Director Emmerich follows the classical tradition of American immigrant film-makers in making the most flag-waving American film I can remember: the major cultural symbols here are the White House, the Washington Monument, the Empire State Building, the New York City skyline, the Statue of Liberty and the "Hollywood" sign in Los Angeles.

Angeles.

Independence Day takes place over three days (a perfect three-act structure) — July 2, 3 and 4 — July 4 being, of course, America's "independence day", named for that day in 1776 when the American colonies announced their independence from Great Britain. On July 2 an enormous, unidentified flying object appears and a set of enormous alien spaceships take position over the major cities of the world. A great sense of awe is followed by panic and, later, massive destruction when the ships actually attack. Many millions of people die (this is not a film for the squeamish

or for children who could be seriously frightened by the violence). Led (of course) by the Americans, humankind counter-attacks after a secret to the alien defense has been figured out.

Key figures in this epic include Will Smith (*Six Degrees of Separation*) as American fighter pilot Steve Hiller, Jeff Goldblum as geeky Jewish techno-wizard David Levinson, Judd Hirsch as David's crusty father Julius, Bill Pullman (*While You Were Sleeping*) as a Clintonesque President, Mary McDonnell (*Dances With Wolves*) as the "first lady", Margaret Colin as David's ex-wife Constance and now press secretary to the President, Randy Quaid as a drunken crop duster pilot

Randy Quaid as a drunken crop duster pilot who was "captured" by aliens some years before, Robert Loggia (*Triumph of the Spirit*) as Presidential defence advisor General Grey, and Harvey Fierstein (*Torch Song Trilogy*) as Marty the television executive.

Independence Day represents the best of current American special effects, big-budget movie-making. All the characters are strong, clear and attractive (except, of course, the aliens); there is a powerful, exciting and gripping narrative which balances personal stories with larger events; and the film is imbued with an overwhelming sense of purpose, heroism and triumph over adversity that will make audiences cheer. The downside is that the film is depressingly full of confusion, death and destruction, and there is no narrative complexity to the alien invasion: we never get to know them, and discover that they are simply unreservedly bad.

Independence Day is a highly unusual big-budget film for another reason; its placements and treatment of significant Jewish characters — three of them all played by prominent Jewish actors. Harvey Fierstein plays his stock character of the neurotic, effete, gay Jewish man, funny but basically two-dimen-





Jeff Goldblum

sional and not germane to the story. Judd Hirsch's role as Julius Levinson becomes important in that he comes up with a number of significant revelations which strongly advance the story. Julius also inserts the only elements of spirituality into the film, and these of course are Jewish.

But it is Jeff Goldblum's character David who figures out the alien communications system, and later works out how to disable seemingly impermeable alien armour shields. When David joins the (black) fighter pilot

When David joins the (black) fighter pilot Steve Hiller in a crucial mission, we see two extraordinary events: the Jew as hero and an American black-Jewish partner/friendship. This *Independence Day* provides one of the most positive mainstream portrayals of Jews in a very long time.

Don Perigut
