

✓ **The Way to the Stars (U)**

10th October 2005

Director: **Anthony Asquith**

UK 1945

Running time : 109 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Michael Redgrave** (Flight Lt. David Archdale), **John Mills** (Peter Penrose), **Rosamund John** (Toddy Todd), **Douglass Montgomery** (Johnny Hollis), **Trevor Howard** (Squadron Leader Sil Carter).

SCRIPT: **Terence Rattigan, Richard Sherman** from a story by **Anatole de Grunwald**).

PHOTOGRAPHY: **Derrick Williams**. EDITING: **Fergus McDonell**. MUSIC: **Nicholas Brodsky, Charles Williams**.

Of all the many films to present an upbeat picture of us in wartime, the one that will chiefly be remembered when the rest are all but forgotten is this one. Fitting, therefore, that we wanted a film in memory of John Mills since this is also one of his most typical roles, that of a basically good egg with nevertheless some personal issues to work out.

The plot unfolds at an airbase, Ha'penny Field, and begins at the key period of 1940 as Squadron Leaders must send increasingly inexperienced pilots aloft. To the disapproval of one flier, Penrose, his superior, Archdale, takes a wife, Toddy, the attractive landlady of the local hostelry, only to be killed in action in due course.

How the film develops from this relatively schematic opener – I ought to say *that* it develops – is its principal charm. Having seen both *Angels One Five* and *Battle of Britain* recently, the differences came home to me. Where they proceed along operational lines, within the limitations of their budgets, *The Way to the Stars* boasts not a single aerial sequence; for it is not concerned with operations but with people. Which is equally why its strength is those other films' shortcoming – trying vainly to make us care about goggled men through perfunctory personal backstories.

The first development is Penrose's own flirtation, which he truculently puts on hold, with the put-upon paid companion of the hotel's resident viper. Then there is his friendship with the widow, over whom he extends a protective gaze born of shared grief (right) and a perceived alliance against the formation of sentimental attachments in wartime (wrong). Then the Yanks arrive and Penrose becomes an administrator at what is now a base for Flying Fortresses. Simultaneously the tone shifts

slightly from stiff-upper-lip fighter pilot dramatics to brash bomber crew levity (in operational terms it would be two different films!) There's a dashing US officer (Johnny – see below) who seems to have a thing going with Toddy, but then no, he's just missing his family back home. And then again...

Whether Penrose remains a sourpuss or comes round to Toddy's view of things ('I wouldn't have done any differently had I known') is really the only suspense in this tale. And yet it is one of the most charming and moving films to have been made about the war, and also the most encompassing. For by setting it at the inn for the most part, the writers astutely spotlight not only the fighters but those left on the ground, the women, the non-combatants (Stanley Holloway in jovial form as a spiv), the selfish as well as the suffering.

No discussion of the film would be complete without mentioning John Pudney's poem, scribbled in the film by Archdale on a piece of paper which tellingly passes from hand to hand after his death. It undergoes three readings, two reverential by people who love him, the third mocking by someone who doesn't even know him (Bonar Colleano). It acquires its power from a series of nonchalant self-portraits in rhyming couplets, so disarming in their simplicity that they shun sentimentality (the US release title was *Johnny in the Clouds*), and ends with a quiet exhortation that breaks the rhyme scheme and is guaranteed to wring a tear from the most jaundiced eye. In the poem lies distilled the whole ethos of Britain during the war and it is penned not by a poet but a pilot, which is why it works.

David Clare