

Rescue Dawn

Jungle Fever

By Josef Woodard

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***Rescue Dawn*. Christian Bale and Steve Zahn star in a film written and directed by Werner Herzog.**



For three decades and counting, the often fascinating German-born director Werner Herzog has been heading into the jungle in search of true metaphorical and narrative grit. By creating complex and neurotic stories based on true life tales, Herzog seems obsessed with the recurring theme of men drawn into the wild for various reasons, who end up in ruin or redemption, or both. It began with his masterpiece, *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, continued with *Fitzcarraldo*, and now becomes an official trilogy with *Rescue Dawn*. (Arguably, we could also toss in his remarkable, multi-level documentary *Grizzly Man*, about the late grizzly bear fetishist Timothy Treadwill).

In the latest chapter of Herzog's obsession — the closest thing to a standard Hollywood movie yet in the Herzog filmography — the subject is Dieter Dengler, a fighter pilot who was shot down in Laos while on a classified bombing mission, (this being before the Vietnam War was a *fait accompli*). We follow Dengler's arduous and dogged path through the trials of a scruffy POW camp and then his scrambling through the ravages of the jungle while seeking escape and deliverance. One of those filmmakers ever wobbling on the line between truth and fiction, Herzog knows the Dengler story well, having made a documentary on him, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. He obviously saw potential for a fictionalized expansion.

Christian Bale is the right man for the job as Dengler, a man with a powerful drive to survive. An actor known to embrace extremes, as when he dropped his weight to skeletal levels as the star in *The Machinist*, Bale impressively transforms from hale and hardy to gaunt and haunted.

While the film exerts a powerful intrigue, and with an admirable slow, methodical pace befitting the story, there are signs of commercial compromise along the way, as if Herzog had to soften the edges and render the structure more generic than he might have in order to get it made. The musical score, for instance, shifts between dull clichés and the bursts of artful enigma with passages by respected cellists Ernst Reijseger and Frances-Marie Uitti. Those cello moments offer a subtle sensory passageway into the psychological underpinning of both the extreme drama and the allegorical potential of the story.

Still and all, Herzog has made another entrancing and transformative trip into the jungle, and this time in a way suitable for a multiplex instead of the art house.