

FILM
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Hello sunshine

Blockbuster Sunshine

Science fiction, a genre which is all too frequently bestrode by wisecracking Will Smiths, owes us just one thing: awe. Mostly this is achieved, or at least approximated, with expensive smoke-and-mirror SFX that send our jaws crashing to the floor but leave our brains idling in neutral. For *Sunshine*, however, writer Alex Garland (*The Beach*) and director Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, *28 Days Later*) have strapped enough cosmic concerns to fill a Pink Floyd album to the back of an exceptional B movie, and set the controls for the heart of the sun.

It's 50 years in the future and the eponymous orb is dying, freezing earth and its inhabitants in a fatal solar winter-without-end. The eight-strong crew of the *Icarus II* have been sent out on an 'entirely theoretical' - and most likely suicidal - mission to restart it with the help of a giant nuclear bomb. 'If you wake up one morning and it's a particularly beautiful day, you'll know we made it,' explains sad-eyed scientist Capa (Cillian Murphy, part of a quirky, credible international cast including the *Fantastic Four*'s Chris Evans and *Crouching Tiger*'s Michelle Yeoh), introducing the film's main dynamic: the dichotomy between the terrible perfection of the universe and the mundane dangers of human fallibility; the almighty versus the microcosmic.

On the inside, *Icarus II* is a mess of monitors, futuristic office furniture and modish modularity; on the outside it's a magnificent, shimmering CG disco ball spinning silently in space. Computer graphics usually bring fantasy films crashing back to earth by reminding the eye that what it's seeing is a facsimile, rather than inflaming a sense of wonder. Here, the effects are nothing short of astonishing. Witness how both the narrative, and the crew, pause to watch Mercury pirouetting impossibly around the sun, or how



an unfortunate straggler shatters into a billion balletic shards of ruby-red space ice.

As Murphy's Law ratchets up the tension, and human error destroys *Icarus II*'s life-support system, an ingenious Eden-like facility that allows the ship to produce its own oxygen (a greenhouse, essentially), Garland manages to slip some surprisingly weighty philosophical conceits in amid the excitement. After all, the impending destruction of humanity is not just a matter of life and limb; it also questions the existence of an afterlife.

Appropriately for a medium that relies on the stuff, light takes on a quasi-religious quality. Unlike the dark vacuum of space explored in most sci-fi, here the blinding sunlight evokes the sense of a higher consciousness. 'Our dreams are foolish in the face of this,' murmurs an astronaut drawn irrevocably to this life-giving and life-taking flame. There's even room for a bit of subtext. The proliferation of screens, filters and lens flares that divide the frame suggest a human race disconnected from itself, its minutest movements viewed remotely, through a scanner darkly.

Assimilating, rather than aping, influences such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Sunshine* is the most satisfyingly cerebral blockbuster since *The Matrix* - like *The Fountain*, only much more fun. Instead of dying in a hail of bullets, the crew of the *Icarus II* pass into infinity like scared children gazing into the gleaming eye of an angry god. How's that for awe?

Sunshine is on general release from 6 April. Director: Danny Boyle. Run time: 107 minutes

Arthouse Prick Up Your Ears

On 9 August 1967 Kenneth Halliwell beat his lover, the controversial playwright Joe Orton, to death with a hammer, ending his own life through an overdose of barbiturates washed down with the sickly grey syrup from a tin of pineapple chunks. To commemorate the 40th anniversary of Orton's sordid demise, Stephen Frears' 1987 biopic is screening at the ICA.

Beginning with the murder, and using the writing of John Lahr's 1978 biography as its framework, this bluely comic and slightly bumbling film, a kitchen-sink tragicomedy of bitter laughs and poverty-line porn, editorializes Orton's career and Halliwell's tainted love while bringing the dank, *Withnail*-esque misery of Sixties London evocatively to life.

Joe (Gary Oldman) wanted something from Kenneth (Alfred Molina), Kenneth wanted something from Joe,' says Lair (Wallace Shawn). 'It's not corruption, it's collaboration.' Still, it's hard to unpick the whys and wherefores of their mutually destructive relationship: the sort of train wreck that occurs when those for whom things matter love those for whom they don't.

Looking like a cross between Alexei Sayle and *Apocalypse Now*'s Colonel Kurtz, Halliwell is a preening nearly-man crippled by the vampiric sadness of the unwilling wallflower. Orton, meanwhile, is a priapic, pretty-boy chancer: a master of pilfered wit always smirking for an imaginary camera, as if wanting the world to share some private joke. His tragedy, perhaps, is that everyone except his lover did. Halliwell's is that he was never in on the joke in the first place.

After meeting at RADA, where Kenneth's audition is greeted with the white noise of a bored auditorium, the pair become partners and conspirators, attacking the suffocating strictures of respectable literature by defacing library books, and cruising public toilets for illicit love.

Molina is an actor who can unsheathe a switchblade of pathos in two words, but as Orton's solo success (sexual and professional) relegates Halliwell to a background of servitude and vicarious pleasures, his sad-sack performance feels more like a creation of the stage. Despite Oldman's best efforts, Orton himself remains nebulous, a shapeshifter tangled up in his own appetites who's so desperate to be an icon - or an iconoclast - that he constantly reinvents himself, even changing his name (apparently John Orton sounded too much like John Osborne).

Juxtaposing the filth and fustiness of Sixties England with a naughty old lady's fascination for matters of the nether regions, Alan Bennett's script crackles with wit and poignancy. 'I bet Dirk Bogarde didn't distemper his mother's bedspread,' howls the formidable Mrs Orton (Julie Walters, a paragon of lower-middle-class maternal outrage). 'Were there times when you were happy?' Orton senior (James Grant) is asked at his wife's wake. 'Oh yes, several.'

Encyclopaedic but a little episodic, *Prick Up Your Ears* is a grim guided tour of an ultimately unknowable life, which reminds us that the only way to truly understand something is to kill it. Something Kenneth Halliwell knew all too well.

Prick Up Your Ears is at the ICA from 6-19 April. Director: Stephen Frears. Run time: 110 minutes



Gary Oldman (left) as Joe Orton and Alfred Molina as Kenneth Halliwell in *Prick Up Your Ears*