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BY MICHAEL GILTZ & FRIENDS

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"Superman Returns" -- * * 1/2

You'll truly believe a man can fly. That was the promise of 1978's "Superman" with Christopher Reeve -- great special effects. But in fact the movie offered something much more important -- great characters. When you believe in Clark Kent and Lois Lane, frankly it doesn't matter how good the special effects are. (George Lucas forgot this years ago.) Now "Superman Returns" is enjoyable. And if you want to compare it to something, why not compare it to "Superman III" and "Superman IV," by which standard it is terrific indeed. It doesn't suck. But why are the first things that come to mind when praising it the special effects? I simply loved the way this movie depicted flying -- it's graceful, gentle, inspiring. When Superman is trying to rescue an out of control airplane, there's a moment when he pauses in mid-air and then throws himself towards the damaged craft with all his might -- it catches your breath because it looks so real. Even better is the emotional highlight of the movie -- a gentle late-night flight with Lois Lane where Superman tries to explain why he went away for five years and what it's like for him to spend every waking moment hearing cries for help from all over Metropolis and the world. What else springs to mind when thinking about the movie? The cool color of Superman's cape, the washed out palette of much of the movie, the recycling of that brilliant original score. What doesn't come to mind so much? Clark Kent and Lois Lane. Brandon Routh makes a much better Superman than he does a Clark Kent. Clark makes almost no impression while Supe holds your attention every time he talks to Lois (which isn't often enough). Kate Bosworth isn't as bad as I had heard as Lois, but unfortunately -- except for that one late night flight -- she doesn't get along with Superman and doesn't even seem terribly interested to see Clark after he's been away for years. So what are we left with? The secondary characters. Kevin Spacey has fun as Lex Luthor without going over the top and Parker Posey has a few good moments as his sidekick. But Frank Langella has nothing to do as Perry White. (Compare that to the great character of the newspaper editor in "Spiderman.") Think about

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