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**Flatliners**  
**Cast breathes life into summer movie**



Kiefer Sutherland and Julia Roberts

By JOHN RIGHTER

The idea that life would be easier if we knew what realm lay beyond it is the premise behind director Joel Schumacher and writer Peter Filardi's "Flatliners," a Lovecraftian tale of death and mother nature.

Keifer Sutherland stars as Nelson Wright, a dark, demanding figure who gathers a troupe of medical students for his experiment with the afterlife, an experiment that will drag medical science down into the bowels of philosophy and religion.

The student's death trials demand each participant stop their heart until the monitor reading their vital signs indicates nothing but flat lines. Then a specified waiting period proceeds, before the other team members revive the legally dead patient. The length of the waiting period becomes a foolish gambling point for the crew, leading to longer and longer times for each succeeding participant.

David Labraccio (Kevin Bacon), Rachel Mannus (Julia Roberts), Joe Hurley (William Baldwin) and Randy Steckle (Oliver Platt) complete the daring quintet, each selected for his or her medical specialty and dark disposition.

Once the experiment begins, strange developments arise. Immortality is not meant for medical science, and each group member (except for Steckle, the annoying, yet curious devil's advocate) brings back a manifestation of their past sins. The infringement of this past sin on their present life (and for each it is different) can be altered only through the atonement of that sin.

The remainder of "Flatliners" is spent following the search of each participant as they try to make amends with their past. The search for atonement is especially interesting and amusing for Wright, a real s.o.b., who ends up taking it on the chin (literally) several times.

If "Flatliners" sounds morbid, it's not. Despite the heavy religious imagery, gothic settings and Lovecraftian atmosphere, the film is actually done in good taste and with good intentions. There is definitely a message against rushing the natural process of death, but, even so, "Flatliners" has a positive ending and the opportunity for atonement of past errors is a wonderful notion.

In fact, the film might actually inspire a few hearts to follow the lead of Labraccio, who finds the error of his past and apologizes, allowing for his atonement.

Schumacher ("The Lost Boys," "St. Elmo's Fire" and "Cousins") and Filardi's interpretation of the after-life experience is interesting and thought-provoking, which is as good as any compliment for a film as ambitious as this.

It's comforting to know that some directors and film producers are actually trying to develop quality, original work, and not just hopping on the sequel bandwagon, the dearth of this summer.

"Flatliners" is not a great film, but it is visually arresting (the contrast of light and dark is well used), and quite solid. The sets are excellent and the script is somewhat daring up until the end. The movie drags at parts, becoming long-winded and repetitive in a couple of the death seances, but does eventually pull you back in.

Roberts, as the afterlife-infatuated Rachel, is slightly miscast, but Bacon is once again terrific as the level-headed Labraccio.

In lieu of such a horrendous summer for films, it's hard not to recommend any movie with a trace of originality. Certainly, "Flatliners" is fresh, and in light of what I've seen recently, an easy film to recommend.

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