

SPACE CAMP

Directed by Harry Winer
Produced by Patrick Bailey and Walter Coblenz
Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox
Released in 1986

Though produced with expectations of a summertime smash, *Space Camp* crashed in 1986. With the dumb luck of a release date a few months after the disintegration of the *Challenger*, a movie about space-shuttle peril met a public eager to embrace more fanciful material. The film is largely forgotten, embraced by aficionados with a bent for nostalgia and the obscure. Apart from the cast (which is actually very good) *Space Camp* must have cost a fortune. It boasts John Williams's first film score in two years, and it stands as the biggest opportunity of Kate Capshaw's career, bigger even than *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*.

Capshaw is the only *name* in the film, and its failure probably sank her career. Usually a burgeoning star is given a shot at above-the-title, or high-profile leading role, status. Some names that come to mind are Scott Bakula in *Lord of Illusions*; Rosanna Arquette in *Who's That Girl?*; the Olsen twins in *New York Minute*; Billy Zane in *The Phantom*; Catherine McCormack in *Dangerous Beauty*; Shelly Long in *Hello Again* and *Troop Beverly Hills*; Tom Selleck (in at least ten years of roles); Ray Romano in *Welcome To Mooseport*; Bridget Fonda in *Point of No Return*; and Fran Drescher (*Beautician and the Beast*).

Space Camp is either a good movie or a great movie with qualifications. Its pleasures subside with multiple viewings. The twelfth viewing is like a two-liter Sunkist on its fourth day—still eye-catching, but fizzless.

Still, few films can sustain twelve viewings, let alone two. This one takes an original idea and goes full throttle with it. The campers' adventure is so appealing that the audience becomes envious of these imperiled explorers.

A fanciful depiction of outer space opens the film—verdant nebulae superimposed over a stock star field, but the transition to the real is not clear. We pull back to take in the moon and a young Andy watching the sky amidst tender grains. On the reverse shot of Andy in front of the farm house, we realize that there never was a transition to the real. The sky behind Andy is unremittingly black, the sky in front of her is *loaded* with stars, unremittingly fake.

Since from here, 1962, we zoom into the future, we might consider the larger role of Kate Capshaw's character. This framing device establishes, in retrospect, Andy as the protagonist, which is not the case. It is a charming scene (save for the girl's attitude with her mother ["Can too see it."]) merely establishing the Romantic appeal of space flight, an idea addressed more effectively later.

Now it is 1986, and we're at Space Camp, but we have no idea where that is. In real life it's in Huntsville, Alabama, but here, somehow, a launch pad is just a few miles away. Perhaps the producers are merely blurring a disparity between the real and imagined, establishing a basis for belief (or suspension thereof) much needed for the action to follow.

In the first dialogue exchange of the movie, Zach and Andy discuss her failure to secure a spot on the next shuttle flight. She, incredulous, remarks that the astronaut who bested her gets air sick in cars. Is this merely an attempt at witty banter, of jealous exaggeration on the part of a jilted astronaut? Otherwise it's wishful thinking.

We're carried out of our confusion by the cool blast of "Forever Man," one of Eric Clapton's best records. The camera is trained on a man jamming in his Jeep—the real hero of *Space Camp*, Kevin Donaldson. He is given the biggest entrance of the five crew members, and he is the only character to undergo a major change in attitude through the course of the film. The journey into space is a hero's journey, and this is the Forever Man, brought to life by Tate Donovan.

So promising is this character that a sequel could be dominated by him, but, just like *The Matrix*, with one film the journey is complete and everything that follows would be manufactured angst and details.

Kevin is a spoiled pleasure seeker with no redeeming features save an ear to listen. His romantic interest, Kathryn, is military-minded, leadership-inclined, and demonstrates an annoying tendency for self-deception. Responding to Tish's enthusiasm for makeup, she replies, "Guys go for what I haven't got. Makeup isn't going to help."

Now, plenty of guys watching this movie would find that statement preposterous and many girls watching would be annoyed. Actress Lea Thompson is strikingly attractive, and she was cast in roles that capitalized on her beauty, so the sentiments of the character are a poor match for the actress. It's bad writing or bad casting.

Soon, Kevin is making a move on what she has not "got." He offers some innocuous advice on the multi-access trainer she's been struggling with, and she launches into flirtatious banter incompatible with her self-perception. Nevertheless, the two are soon perched on the hood of Kevin's Wrangler, admiring the spot-lit shuttle. This scene is one of the best in the film. Kathryn relates her memories of flying with her father when she was little, deciding even then to be an astronaut. "I couldn't wait to grow up," she confides.

Kevin sure could. They are an unlikely pair. He's drawn to her beauty, but at this stage of the film Kevin has nothing to offer but a handsome visage.

He replies to her reflections with, "What's so special about going up?", thereby equating the journey into space with the passage into adulthood. Thus we are treated with some thoughtful symbolism. Kevin thinks any ambition is pointless—he's not afraid, he contends; he just doesn't care. But she, finding promise in him unseen by the world, says he does.

At this juncture, Kathryn hungers for responsibility, and Kevin can't run away from it fast enough. Andy gave him the shuttle commander job to light a fire under Kathryn, but Kevin indeed, it turns out, was the better choice.

Yet his potential is unrealized until he 'goes up' and is finally shocked by reality, realizing he must assert himself, care for others, and grow up...or people are going to die.

But before that happens, we can enjoy the funniest scene of the film—misadventures in the space shuttle trainer. As Tom Skerrit just mugs in quiet disbelief, Kate Capshaw tries to return order to the simulator as Kathryn abandons her post to micro-manage Rudy. Kevin seems more unwilling than unable to restore order and, as the 'shuttle' descends to obliteration, the commander cracks wry jokes and revels in the farce. He is subsequently berated by Andy,

whose seriousness about what is nothing more than a very-involved video game strikes Kevin as absurd. He disclaims responsibility, but the crew gives him a serious look like they agree that Kevin is to blame. The scene further advances the hero's ethos.

With the lackluster performance of this ragtag bunch, it's extraordinary that they are picked for the space shuttle main engine test. Tish attributes their opportunity to "luck." We see the campers assigned to ground-control training hanging around amidst the NASA brain trust, so maybe an entire age group goes and since (with the exception of Max) they're the oldest campers, they go. But if that were the case, when Tish and Kathryn first approached Zach as he rearranged the bulletin board, he would have known they would go. He could be playing dumb. Or the robot Jinx may have rigged the lottery so he could send his friend-forever Max to his grave.

Once everyone is settled in *Atlantis*, Kevin allows Kathryn to reply to Control's query for a radio check—hereby Kevin is re-establishing his relationship with Kathryn after a falling-out (note the eye contact) while once again relinquishing responsibility.

Soon the main-engine test is under way, and as the campers start to shake, booster rocket B begins to bake. The whole situation is bizarre. Not only are these undistinguished teenagers at the controls of a multi-billion-dollar piece of space hardware, NASA saw fit to attach boosters to the fuselage when they wouldn't even be used in the test. Without the boosters, NASA will not have to launch. Because of the boosters (and an extraordinary thoughtful robot), they do.

Regardless of the challenges the screenwriters faced bringing us to this juncture, the ignition of booster A to match booster B is a thrill. Whatever the suspension of, or concession to, disbelief necessary here, the mental leap is well deserved considering the excitement of the material.

Soon these "clean-cut, All-American kids" are in orbit. At first they are quite taken with the view. Rudy comments, "Boy, I could stay up here forever."

But then Max, the ultimate space-crazie, whimpers, "Andy, I want to go home."

It is here that Andy first exercises great leadership. She says three things:

- 1) How this happened doesn't matter
- 2) We are going to get home
- 3) I'll need all your help

The first order of business is to address their lack of oxygen. Ideas are tossed back and forth, but nobody mentions using the oxygen in the space suits. Kevin inadvertently provides the solution by mentioning 7-Eleven.

Now they have to trek to *Dedalus* and recover oxygen from the fledgling space station. Still, all remains calm. That the campers don't go wild is achievement enough. They've got some kind of resolve, that's for sure.

Everyone has his moment. Photographic-memory-girl Tish's suggestion of Morse Code eventually saves all their lives, as does Max's bravery and size in recovering the oxygen tanks, and Rudy's ability to successfully oversee the installation of the canisters.

Through many travails, they have their air, but then Andy is hurt and floats, unconscious, tethered to the shuttle. With NASA putting the ship on auto, the key moral dilemma of the movie is established.

The argument is clearly framed. Kathryn has been left in charge and listens to advice as she eyes the override switch. Kevin observes, "If we override NASA we miss the window [to land]. We gotta go now."

Tish replies, "We can't leave Andy."

As the clock ticks down, Rudy implores, "Do something, Kathryn."

Indeed, she is—not flipping the switch. Rudy wants her to, but is respecting her authority, as is Tish. The old Kevin, the self-serving Kevin, the one who deemed a sacrifice of Andy necessary, is finally overcome. Immediately, the potential that Kathryn saw in him is realized in the split-second decision to flip the switch. He does the right thing. They could get home safe, but despite the inevitable sympathy of NASA honchos, they would feel guilty to the end of their days.

We recall that in the simulator, when everything fell apart, Andy exclaimed to Kevin, "You are responsible for every person on this ship."

When it counted, Kevin was.

In an echo of the jeep scene mentioned above, Kathryn and Kevin now consider their fate beside Andy, inert. Where before Kathryn had talked about her father, now she discusses her mother, who once said, "Being boss and being bossy isn't the same." Kathryn admits she is not a good commander. She seems incapable of allowing people to do their jobs—questioning an underling or even replacing him is fine—if you know you're stuff. As her failure with the air hoses demonstrated, she doesn't.

But she can fly the space shuttle. To make sure she does, Kevin once again demonstrates great leadership.

Kathryn is over-loaded with the pressure of re-entry. Kevin, who could have been mean-tough ("Stop whining, you have to do it!"), or cool-tough ("You were made to do this. You're unstoppable; go for it!"), aims for subtlety:

"What's the worst thing that could happen? We'll all die, right? We're all gonna die if you don't do it, so just relax, okay? You're panicked."

"You're damn right I'm panicked."

"Okay, fine. That's perfect. I'll do it...Tish, you ever read a book on how to fly this thing?"

"...Okay, I'll do it."

"So competitive, aren't we?"

How appropriate it is, once they are flying though the sky, headed to land, that in response to Control's call, this time Kevin proudly answers, "Copy that, Control. This is *Atlantis!*"

The movie ends as it should, without the inevitable letdown of some big welcome-home celebration. The response of the outside world had no bearing on the direction of the story, and for the film to now break away from this collegial intimacy would be ruinous; what remains is better left to the imagination. These six will enjoy unparalleled renown upon their landing, their lives set for a different path than the ones awaiting them before Space Camp.

Inevitably there will be a letdown, and people will forget, as all eventually do, their heroes. But these six would know that when tested they held fast...they were capable of the extraordinary. And none had proved this more than Kevin, the hero of heroes.