

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

A smashing time as the bombs fall

I resent movies that offend, yet at the same time make me feel I'm not entitled to an opinion. It's like being among people who are making insensitive jokes about their own ethnic group.

Having not been alive during the second world war, for example, I am never quite sure whether I am justified in my unease about films in which the characters claim that the war was the greatest time of their lives. I'm not talking about real war movies with soldiers, but rather a relatively recent breed of nostalgia: the fictional, jolly accounts of war as recalled by characters only dimly aware of the conflict.

The one film in this genre I am very confident in disliking is Penny Marshall's *A League of Their Own* (1992). The story had a promising premise: women of a certain age fondly recollect the All-American Girls' Professional Baseball League, which had been formed because the male players were at war.

The film was hailed as a victory for feminist cinema, heralding a new breed of war stories from a smaller, domestic angle rather than focusing on those tiresome shell-shocked men. Instead, it conveyed an unintentionally propagandistic image of a mainland US that was fine and dandy during the war, troubled only by low attendance at baseball games, and a shortage of nylon stockings.

Along similar lines, I had mixed feelings about *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells*, a new made-for-television movie about a wartime swing band. (HBO. Saturday,



Sax appeal: Judi Dench reaches for the top notes in 'The Last of the Blonde Bombshells'

August 26, at 9pm ET.) The capable writer-director team of Alan Plater (who wrote *The Fortunes of War*) and Gillies Mackinnon (who directed *Hideous Kinky*) collaborated on the project.

It seems they were trying to create a throwback to several classic American film genres, only with a British rather than an American setting, which brings the story closer to the battle action.

The problem is that the film is so creepily jovial it makes Disney's *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* – the children's classic film in which Angela Lansbury uses witchcraft to get the Nazis out of a Scotsman's backyard – seem like *The Sorrow and the Pity*.

The film begins in modern times, with the protagonist, Elizabeth (Judi Dench), finding herself suddenly widowed. She takes the advice of her precocious 12-year-old granddaughter Joanna: "The best way to respect the dead? That's easy! You go on living."

Elizabeth resolves to reunite the Blonde Bombshells, the

troops in London during the second world war. Patrick (played by Ian Holm), the only male member of the Bombshells, provides the obligatory survivor's guilt. He recalls that he posed as a female drummer to avoid the draft, confessing: "For six years we lived with the possibility that every second of the day or night we could be killed. And we feel guilty. Yet for some of us who survived, it was totally wonderful."

Having cleared his conscience, the festivities can now begin. I didn't think much of the flashback scenes, which are a bland, unironic mimicry of the stridently patriotic American war-era musicals. In their time, those films served a morale-boosting function; out of context, these scenes are just scary.


The Bombshells' vocals have that shrill, Andrews Sisters-style train whistle sound. Their flossy, platinum-blond upswept wigs and overly painted, unblinking faces make them look like oversexed Dresden dolls.

scenes set in contemporary times. Together, Dench and Holm pay a winking homage to the rock 'n' roll road movie, in which a few members of a defunct band face some sort of adversity, which then becomes a thin excuse for someone to declare: "We've got to reassemble the band."

In *Bombshells*, the excuse is that the spirited Joanna has promised her primary school that the Bombshells will perform at the upcoming school dance. Joanna's conviction that her granny is sublimely cool is, one must admit, pretty adorable.

True to the road-movie genre, there's a bit of trouble collecting the former players. One of the Bombshells is in prison, another is an alcoholic – played with gusto by Olympia Dukakis.

The cast is very strong, including a surprise cameo by Leslie Caron as a French double-bassist; she remains effortlessly sensuous as always. On the whole the programme is not unenjoyable, so long


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