

Film explores obsession with space exploration

By Rocket Rob

I was invited to a pre-screening of the new film *The Astronaut Farmer*. It's a familiar story of a man whose dream of becoming an astronaut is sidelined to save the family farm. This maverick dreamer is Texan Charlie Farmer played by Billy Bob Thorton. Farmer was training to be a Nasa astronaut when his father passed away forcing him to choose between his family and a space-faring career.

Fast forward years later, and Farmer is now a rancher living the settled life with a wife played by Virginia Madsen (Audie Farmer) and three kids. His unbridled passion for space travel and rocketry never was extinguished.

Farmer's perseverance and passion for space exploration are not just ego-based dreams but an infectious attitude which makes it a family affair. Dinner conversations about 'whose going to the moon with me and what are you going to bring' are as commonplace as discussing what did you do at work in most American households. The present manifestation of Farmer's dream is to build a functional rocket in his barn that will launch him to orbit. People just don't go building rockets without "*the man*" (*the FBI*) noticing them.

While most of his friends have chosen more conventional livelihoods, Charlie chose to become an astronaut even though ranching is in his genes. Farmer visits his child's class in — you guessed it — a space suit, and he's complimented by the teacher on his great "costume." Being mocked and ridiculed is just part of the deal when you're the only do-it-yourself space-entrepreneur in a small Texas town and for that matter probably only one in the entire country.

Throughout the film, the threat of foreclosure on the farm looms like a big Texas Thunderstorm. Rumors run the gamut about that Farmer behaves like a cult leader as "men in black" investigate Farmer's bid to blast into space. The aim of those men in black is to keep Farmer firmly grounded on mother earth.

Michael Polish, director and co-writer, related to me the idea for the film came from the hypothetical him and his brother proposed if they built a rocket. They based much of their research on Mercury-Atlas program, which launched the first American astronauts into space.

He commented that if given 15 years, he could probably build a rocket. Maybe that's stretching the truth just a little bit, but recent history demonstrates that with tenacity, clever engineering, and a tiny budget anything becomes possibility. Look at today when fact resembles fiction with Armadillo Aerospace on the low end, or Scaled Composites with its X-Prize winning entry on the high end of these "budget" space projects. There are probably other individuals worldwide who are financing their seemingly impossible dreams on via credit cards, home equity loans, and Internet auctions.

There's an underlying sense that the American government should not have the exclusive say as to who can and cannot go to space. While the film does not try to portray the idea that traveling to space is easy, it does represent that this exclusive club should be accessible to a wider and more diverse group. Beyond political beliefs, this film demonstrates that the through sacrifice, passion, and ingenuity anything is possible. The space enthusiast crowd, both amateur and professional, will certainly enjoy this film,

but it also appeals to the non-space junkies and may lead to more interest in space travel for the masses. Skeptics will say there are too many flaws to make this film believable. I would tell the naysayer that people don't go to the movies to see reality or even stretched reality.

Never giving up your dream are the watchwords in *The Astronaut Farmer*. The director, an alumnus from the art school at the California Institute of the Arts indicated how visual artists like Rockwell and Edward Hopper influenced the film. I particularly enjoyed the mixing of old and new technologies. Horse drawn carriages, trucks, and a rocket all peacefully reside on the Farmer Ranch. The intertwining of old and new technologies reinforces the idea that our present technological achievements stood on the shoulders of many of humanity's past accomplishments and inventions. Cinematographer David Mullen, (*Akeelah and the Bee* and *Twin Falls Idaho*), a long time partner with the Polish brothers, beautifully captured the southwest vistas that could have inspired the boy Farmer's dreams of becoming an astronaut.

The *Astronaut Farmer* resonated with me on multiple levels in respect to life dreams being unfulfilled, importance of family, and the quintessentially American style do-it-yourself entrepreneurship. A person I know is building his own rocket-powered vehicle. His family is making both personal and financial sacrifices to help realize his dream. Although this engineer's vehicle will not be traveling to space, it is still impressive. You can catch a glimpse of this visionary's dream at www.SpeedUpWorld.com.

There's no reason why rockets can't be good neighbors with farmers.

Now Playing:

Warner Bros. Pictures

Directed by
Michael Polish

Writing credits :
Mark Polish (written by) &
Michael Polish (written by)

MPAA: Rated PG for thematic material, peril and language.

Runtime: 104 min