

Movie Review: 'The Astronaut Farmer'

by *David_Elliott*

Heading south from the quirks of "Twin Falls Idaho," the Polish brothers (Mark, Michael) have gone to New Mexico, which subs for Texas, and made a sweet, congenial comedy of dreams. "The Astronaut Farmer" contains no murderously jealous astronauts.

Billy Bob Thornton, looking more than ever like a Dust Bowl version of Humphrey Bogart, is the dreamer named Farmer who wants to be an astronaut. Charles Farmer was once a hot Air Force pilot, but when his father died (suicide), he fell from NASA training and settled on the ranch, where cattle deposits and bank debts pile up.

'THE ASTRONAUT FARMER' - Billy Bob Thornton says goodbye to his family in the family film 'The Astronaut Farmer.' CNS Photo courtesy of Richard Foreman.
So what to do, stuck with 300-plus acres, a big barn and time to tinker? Of course: build a mighty rocket, with flight capsule on top. It looks like a booster blast from the Mercury 7 era (Farmer's teen son is named Shepherd, probably for Mercury flight star Alan B. Shepard).

After much sweat and computer time, the great escape gleams hugely in the barn, and once he finds rocket fuel, Farmer plans a launch into orbit. In one of the story conveniences (Mark Polish wrote with director brother Michael), his schedule is hurried by the bank threatening foreclosure - it's never made clear why practical, hard-working wife Audrey (Virginia Madsen) has been in the dark about their great financial peril.

What is clear is that she will lovingly support him, and that the son and two giggly girls adore him. Townsfolk tend to think Farmer is crazy (an "astro-nut"), but also locally inspiring in a gifted way - Thornton can seem perfectly level, sane, calm, but with a spark in the eyes that suggests a whole private continent of the mind.

There are amusing run-ins with the media (yep: Jay Leno cameos) and grim officials. Farmer pulls his former flight buddy (Bruce Willis) down for encouragement, but after a delighted "wow," this straight thinker tells Farmer to stay on Earth, and hope for a guest spot on a shuttle.

Only a noxious critic would spill climaxes, including a swell twist along the way. This farm can bring in a Frank Capra crop, and dreams will likely come true (especially once the craft gets named *The Dreamer*). At its best, the movie has some of the old Capra liftoff, with some of the story of charm of upwardly gazing movies like *"October Sky"* and *"The Dish."*

On the other hand (sorry, this is a review), we could have done with fewer telegraphic speeches and such an obvious spat of marital friction. And music that twinkles cutely or slurs into violin moans. On hand but marginal are such excellencies as Tim Blake Nelson, Bruce Dern and Gary Houston.

The brothers Polish are frisky, which means a snap at the Patriot Act, visuals that mock advertising cliches, and a spoof sequence that uses and kids product plugs. They strain a bit for mainstream likability, while reminding us (broad winks) that they cannot be cozy-dozy hacks.

This oddball has something beyond root-for-the-roots sentiments. Thornton, well into his own orbit, is very genuinely appealing as a guy who wires his big dream machine to a loose but glowing screw in his head. Rise up, farm bird.

A Warner Bros. release. Director: Michael Polish. Writers: Mark and Michael Polish. Cast: Billy Bob Thornton, Virginia Madsen, Bruce Willis, Bruce Dern, J.K. Simmons, Gary Houston, Tim Blake Nelson. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated PG. 3 stars.

RATINGS

4 stars - Excellent.

3 stars - Worthy.

2 stars - Mixed.

1 star - Poor.

0 stars - Forget it.

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