

Hollywood, Etc.: Behind every good rocket man there's a good rocket woman

by David_Elliott

Virginia Madsen compares fairly to Mother Earth.

How to tell? Easy. Looking at 45 on the good side of 35, she sits next to a revolving, glowingly blue ball. It's our home planet, at the San Diego Aerospace Museum.

Billy Bob Thornton, her co-star in "The Astronaut Farmer," went into obscurely private orbit, costing us his visit and his thoughts about playing Charlie Farmer, the film's farmer turned self-launching astronaut. But the blond, radiant Madsen can complement a planet better than Billy Bob ever could.

Many may remember her as the peachiest wine of "Sideways." Madsen's Maya gave that comedy its romantic zing in bibulous visits to wine spots with Miles (Paul Giamatti). The cellar joke that she now divulges is that she can ace wines, but Giamatti couldn't:

"At one setting, we had five bottles of wine. Man, we drank! People still send me wine and want me to sample. I am an actual wine lover. Paul didn't know wine, neither did Thomas (Hayden Church). They'd chug a beer! But Sandra Oh and I knew wine and we did a lot of tasting. That was research, of course. A lot of research."

Wine is off the table for the more wholesome "Astronaut," in which Madsen is Texas wife Audrey and mother of three for Thornton's dreamy, farming techie, who builds his own spacecraft in a barn. She feels that, like Giamatti before, the man from "Bad Santa" is just what the movie required.

"Paul is a character actor more than a leading man," she says, "and Billy Bob likes to say he is a character player. He became a lead by playing an extreme character (Karl in 1996's 'Sling Blade'). But there's something about him that audiences let him go in both directions. He's kinda Bogart-like, real no matter what."

MOTHER EARTH - Behind every good rocket man there's a good rocket woman - and Virginia Madsen fills the bill in the new movie 'The Astronaut Farmer.' CNS Photo By Nancee E. Lewis.

She muses that, "a really handsome guy wouldn't have worked as Charlie Farmer. A George Clooney has to remain basically George Clooney, and that's great, though he sure stretched well in 'Syriana.' Or like Jim Carrey. I've got 'Number 23' opening now with him, and it's taken a long time for people to adjust to Jim as more than a broad comedian, but it's happening. Billy Bob never had to fight for that."

For the born Chicagoan, briefly a Huston (short marriage to John's son Danny), fighting for her own place has meant a very steady climb from playing Princess Irulan in the doomed "Dune" (1984). Before that, like rustic wife Audrey in the movie, there was time "waiting tables, true of most actors. I didn't have the skills for an upscale place. I worked pizza joints."

Great looks and a keen, cutting intelligence have kept her busy, but while raising son Jack, 12, she keeps hustling for jobs. "Astronaut," from the Polish twins (Mark and Michael), came at the right moment:

"It was just good. Both Billy Bob and I had been looking for something like it. We wanted to do family films, something with that Jimmy Stewart, 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington' feeling. Normally, though, with that sort of script it's just a piece of, well, you know, the kids don't sound like real kids, but bitter little adults with attitude. The teens are all dysfunctional and hate their parents. But most aren't like that. I wasn't."

She wanted "a story about an intact family, about all of them, a grown-up story but great for the kids, too. The Farmers are closer to us in real life than anything we've been in. Billy Bob has three kids, he's very devoted, doesn't go out much at night, not into the Hollywood scene. He stays home and watches stuff with his son.

"He's also good for morale on a shoot. I can get quite irritable at 1:30 in the morning, but Billy never seems to get tired. The guys love to talk with him, all the girls flirt. And he was great with the kids."

Audrey questions Charlie's obsession but, in the crunch, backs him. "There needs to be a support system for big dreamers," said Madsen. "I based this on my sister and her family. Her husband dreamed of owning his own restaurant, which these days is almost as crazy as a rocket. They had two little girls and an older son like we do in the movie, and they all worked in the diner and made the dream happen. Even decorated it themselves and the girls waited tables. Me, I never had a marriage that lasted that long, but they've been together 27 years and the kids are grown and my brother is opening another restaurant."

She was thrilled by working with the Polish brothers, young mainstays of indie filming edging into the mainstream. "I don't know if it's a twin thing," Madsen reflects, "but I loved them being on the same page all the time. And they keep a really laid-back vibe on the set. No screaming or yelling.

"They stayed true to their vision, even though the upper (studio) echelon kept sending 'ideas' for the film. Like, they didn't want us, me and Billy, to have this big argument around the dinner table. And we really wanted it. I decided to lay low because I knew I could get really mad about it. But I could never have played her as just 'great, honey, love ya.' I hate those women in films. I've read so many of them, and Audrey isn't one."

She stretched amusingly for Robert Altman's last film, "A Prairie Home Companion," as a sort of angel of death who sweetly crops some radio show members. Though she "adored" working for Altman, it seems typical of Madsen's savvy that she loved the role as concept more than her result on film:

"The whole movie's about death, really, but I am not so sure that the angel thing ultimately worked. Bob was very specific about what he wanted, how I should move and so on. That was cool, but it was weird because I was at a different speed than anyone else in the movie. And that was hard."

Easier was "Astronaut," partly because "I was in heaven working with the kids. The two girls are the Polish brothers' daughters. I want to make a movie with 10 kids!" She taps very easily into five - sons of her big, tough-bear brother, actor Michael Madsen, on whom she will soon be commenting in a mockumentary called "Being Michael Madsen." And she's producing a dreamy indie about karmic aspects of L.A. called "Ripple

Effect," with Minnie Driver and Forest Whitaker.

An astral span of acting comes easily to Madsen, an unreformed Trekkie. She played Kellin in a 1998 episode of "Star Trek: Voyager," fulfilling a very old dream, and is now "totally waiting for a new series!"

Though she didn't much care for the last "Trek" cycle on TV, "I wanted to be in the show before it ended. The nerds behind the show must have known that.

"I told them I had to be the classic, Shatner-era 'Star Trek' babe. No pig nose or anything weird, but a beautiful babe with the tunic and big '60s hair. I got to fire a phaser, beam in and out, had my own quarters, got to be in sick bay, even was on the bridge during a battle.

"I also got to wear a Jeffrey suit. You gotta be a real Trekkie to know what a Jeffrey suit is." Beam her up, Jeff.

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