

The Screen Visions Film Series

Event continues with the space western, rock opera, 'The American Astronaut'

review by Daniel J. Stasiewski
a&e editor

In September, Trigon sponsored a screening of "Rocky Horror Picture Show" that included a goody bag full of the interactive essentials needed for authentic experience of the B Movie cult classic. Since its release 28 years ago, there hasn't been a film that could compete with the irreverence of "Rocky" and garner a cult following that can get even Ericites into fishnet stockings.

"The American Astronaut" might be that film. The sci-fi/western/musical is an eccentric indie developed with the help of the Sundance Institute's Screenwriter's Lab, despite being a little too freaky for even the Sundance crowd. It's a film with a story as original as it is off-the-wall, so much so that the beautiful aesthetics can go unnoticed in the first viewing. With so much to offer, so many lines to memorize, and so many songs to sing, this future Midnight Movie doesn't just require repeat attendance, it clubs-and-sacks a dizzied audience back for more.

Samuel Curtis is an interplanetary trader who gets the moneymaking opportunity of a lifetime. Upon arriving at an outpost in the asteroid belt, Curtis receives a cloned fetus that will develop into a human female. An old friend, named the Blueberry Pirate, tells him he can receive reward money for returning a dead man's body to his family on Earth, if he trades the fetus with the right people.

Curtis has a Han Solo-like concern for wealth, so he jumps on the opportunity with understated anticipation. The first stop is the all-male mining colony on Jupiter to exchange a real woman to be with the-boy-who-once-saw-a-woman's-breast. The 16-year-old boy, who dresses like a silent film star from a 1920s Roman Epic, is excited to leave the dingy planet, but he doesn't know how great his life will be,



BNS PRODUCTIONS
Gregory Russell Cook and Cory McAbee in "The American Astronaut."

especially when he's set to be the adolescent male breeder-king on the all-female planet of Venus.

Once Curtis gets to Venus he'll be able to take the body of the former king back to earth and trade it in for the reward money. Seems simple, but along the way he has to deal with his friend and nemesis, Professor Hess. Hess is a birthday-boy killer who can only kill if he doesn't have a reason. Since he does have a reason to kill Curtis, Hess just follows the trader around, leaving a trail of carnage until he can finally forgive Curtis for their mysterious past and turn him into a pile of dust.

"The American Astronaut" is a wacky rock opera, with songs writ-

ten and performed by director Cory McAbee's band, the Billy Nayer Show. McAbee has fused his band's eccentric rock styling with a ruthless space western, creating a one-of-a-kind epic musical experience.

McAbee's band is so closely associated with this and all his films that it effectively becomes a kind of character of its own, something "The American Astronaut" couldn't exist as it is without. The actual characters in the film do, however, create an eclectic assortment of heroes and villains. They shouldn't be in the same film, as they range from bow-tied killers in suits to southern debutantes. Their drastic, comical differences make them fit together.

When the film was released, it received an Independent Spirit Award nomination for Best Cinematography. The black-and-white pictures do stand out, creating the illusion of empty space. But the film's technique for space travel, disjointed still photos that look like a flip book with missing pages, is the kind of innovation that can only be found in the financially strapped world of indie film.

"The American Astronaut" has the freakish blend of characters, story, and music that could make any film a cult classic. Of course, it will take time. If you're reading this and it's the first time you've ever heard of this 2-year old film, don't fret. "The American Astronaut" is going to be around for a while, waiting for the day when fans dressed as space cowboys will go see it.



"The American Astronaut," directed by and starring Cory McAbee, is showing as part of the Screen Visions Film Series. McAbee will be on hand for a post show Q&A. The screening takes place in Reed 117 on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.

Ferrell's 'Elf' a gigantic step in post-SNL career

by Chris Hewitt
Knight Ridder Newspapers

If you believe press releases, virtually every movie coming out in the next year has two things in common: All of them will be fantastic, and all will star Will Ferrell.

There's "Elf," the holiday comedy that opens Friday. "Bewitched" with Nicole Kidman. Ferrell's first dramatic role, in "Winter Passing," with Ed Harris. The next Woody Allen comedy, "The Offspring," with Drew Barrymore. A comedy about soccer, with Robert Duvall. "Starky and Hutch: The Movie," with Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson. The animated "Curious George" movie, where he's the voice of George's human pal. "The Wendell Baker Story," a comedy with Luke and Owen Wilson (again).

It's exhausting to read that list, and Ferrell acknowledges it's a little exhausting to act in it, too. But ...

"I grew up watching my father in the music business, seeing him having a nightclub gig that could last a month or a year, with no rhyme or reason, and then nothing," says Ferrell. "I have no illusions about the fact that it would be fun to have a long career, but we could be talking next year and I'll be driving a UPS truck. Which is not a slam against that. Nothing wrong with the UPS."

He'd better not be talking smack about parcel services, since they're practically lined up at his door to drop off scripts, all because the buzz on "Elf" is so strong. Still, Ferrell says reports of his hyper schedule are a bit exaggerated.

"As soon as I maybe agree to help develop someone's script, the next day Variety reports 'Ferrell is signed on to do such-and-such,'" he says. "It's 50-50 whether some of those things will happen."

Specifically, he says, "The Woody Allen is for sure. I'm doing that right now. Then there's the Ed Harris one and the Duvall one - OK, I'm disproving my whole point here, aren't I? Most of those are legit, but 'Confederacy' may or may not happen. Same with 'Bewitched.' And a few of the other ones, like 'Starky and Hutch,' are just one- or two-day parts."

Although Ferrell is known for slipping into hideous power suits to impersonate Janet Reno on "Saturday Night Live" and running buck-naked through a town square in "Old School," he comes off as serious, quiet and normal on the phone. So normal that, unlike virtually every other tardy actor I've interviewed on the phone, he calls me himself, rather than letting a publicist or assistant's fingers do the walking, and he does it at 10 a.m. on the dot, exactly when the interview was scheduled.

"Oh, yeah, I'm a freak about that," says Ferrell. "I like to be right on the money in terms of punctuality. You know what, though? I'm going to change that. Someone just rang my door. Hang on a second."

In the background, Ferrell can be heard chatting with a maid at the Ritz-Carlton in Chicago, where he stayed while doing publicity for "Elf." "Sorry," he says when he returns. "Just a little maid service action happening there."

Ferrell says he has not always been good at read-

ing scripts (that would explain "A Night at the Roxbury"), relying too much on gut instincts. "Old School," for instance, a raucous comedy that is probably on every video shelf of every frat house in America, did not appeal to him right off the bat.

"That was a big lesson for me, actually," he says. "At first, I wasn't taken by the whole idea. But, luckily, after sitting down with (director) Todd Phillips and the smart people who represent me, who said, 'This has the potential to be a landmark comedy, I changed my mind. That opened my eyes to not be so quick to judge a comedy right out of the gate, to not say 'No' too quickly."

Same thing happened with "Elf," in which he plays Buddy, a human who, having been mistaken for an elf as a baby, is raised in the North Pole and never notices that his shoe size is eight times the North Pole average. When Buddy is finally told he's a human, he heads to New York to give the city that never sleeps a dose of Christmas cheer.

"The script was brought to my attention by my manager four or five years ago," says Ferrell. "Right away, the concept of the poster, with me in an elf suit, seemed to be something that could work on a lot of levels, but it took a long time to get the idea in order."

The concept sounds like shtick, but the surprise of "Elf" is that Ferrell gives a genuine performance that is sweet, sincere and utterly without guile.

"That was kind of the issue that we had to get right," says Ferrell. "Although it was obviously a comedic performance, I knew I had to play it straight in terms of his thought process. Buddy is like a child in that he has no filters in place, so when he sees a piece of gum on the ground, he thinks, 'Cool. Free candy,' whereas I would say, 'Oh, it's dirty. Yuk.'"

"Yuk" is the reaction some might have to wearing revealing tights for an entire film, as Ferrell does in "Elf" (although the outfit is demure in comparison to what he wore for half of "Old School," which was nothing). Ferrell says steps were taken to make sure he didn't reveal too much of a Christmas package.

"Yeah, it wasn't my favorite costume," acknowledges Ferrell. "Let's put it this way: A real effort was put into giving Buddy an androgynous, asexual look. So there were a couple of pairs of special, diaper-y underwear worn at all times."

The idea was to make sure that "Elf" never ventured into the crass, exactly-the-opposite-of-Christmas-spirit territory that, for instance, the movie version of "The Grinch" stepped into. "That's (director) Jon Favreau," says Ferrell. "He wanted to make sure the movie was kind of heartfelt and sweet, whereas I was especially concerned about the comedic side of things."

Ferrell says he learned pretty quickly to trust Favreau's instincts, and he's pleased that he did. Which is another lesson he has learned from all those movies: Relax.

"You know, there's stuff I have control of. I show up on time. I'm prepared. I call people on time, as you said - 10 o'clock, right on the money," says Ferrell. "But I'm not too much of a worrier, in general, about other things. Even right now, it all feels so unreal that I get to do this great job. So the main thing is to try not to take it too seriously."

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