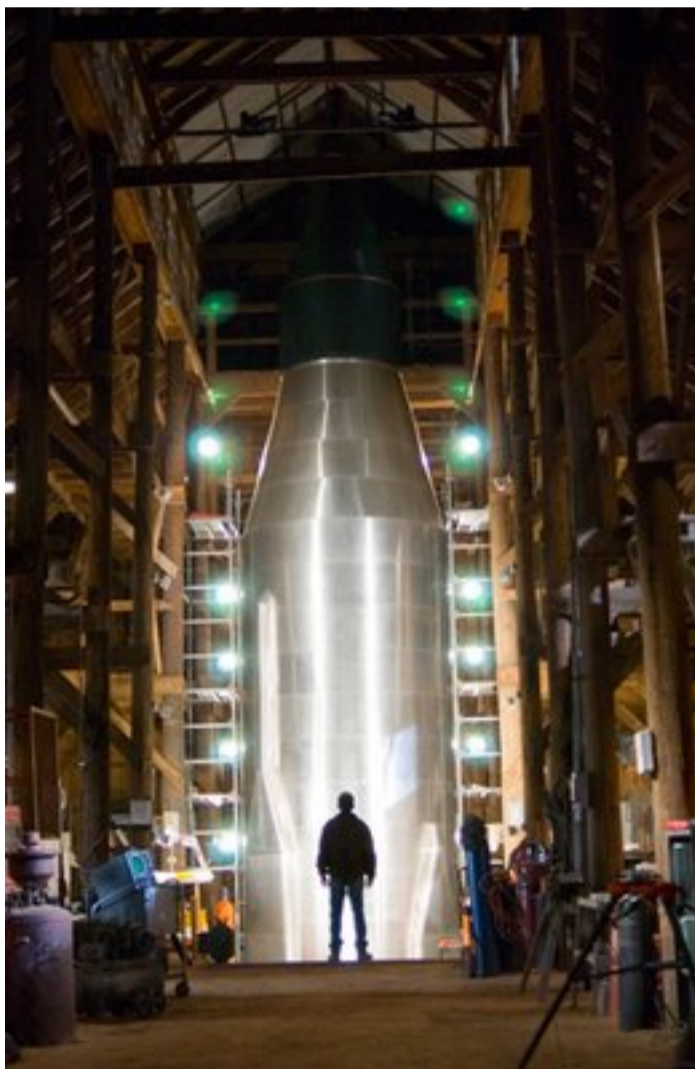


Interview: Billy Bob Thornton, Virginia Madsen on ‘The Astronaut Farmer’

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CHICAGO – “I have a lot of nervous energy in my head. I always have to be working on something,” said actor – and now entrepreneur – Billy Bob Thornton in a Chicago interview with Adam Fendelman.



Billy Bob Thornton stars as Charles Farmer in “The Astronaut Farmer”.

Photo by Richard Foreman and courtesy of Warner Bros.

Despite the mental projection of a guy who’s rough around the edges from earlier film work, Thornton’s unsuspecting lead role as Charles Farmer in “The Astronaut Farmer” tells a decidedly different story: one about the true tenets of American entrepreneurship and family.

Thornton’s taxing road to his dream – building and launching the first civilian rocket into space – is engrained with the uncanny ups and downs reminiscent to entrepreneurs and Internet start-ups.

Before reveling in all the rewards of his final pursuit, Farmer must first risk all that is sacred.

Entrepreneurs are very familiar with the sometimes genius yet sometimes “hypomaniac” compulsion required to trek to the moon – nearly literally in Farmer’s case – and they stop at nothing to get there. They may even be willing to risk their life or family.

While many executives create start-ups out of their garages, Farmer follows suit out of his barn.

The happenstance for Warner Bros. to pick up the film in the first place is also likened to Farmer’s pursuit and that of entrepreneurs themselves. Filmmakers Michael Polish (director/producer/writer) and Mark Polish (producer/writer) describe the process of taking this movie from paper to reality in 33 shooting days as serendipitous.

“Filmmaking is identical to [entrepreneurs and Internet start-ups],” Polish said in an interview with Adam Fendelman on Feb. 7 at the Peninsula Hotel in downtown Chicago. “You have to go out and seek financing and sponsorship and you need a team to launch it. You have to instill a belief in the people around you to dream the same dream.”

Technology in Filmmaking Today

Without hesitation, the filmmaking brothers tag the technology required and the launch of the rocket as the film's most intricate conundrum.



Billy Bob Thornton in space.

Photo by Richard Foreman and courtesy of Warner Bros.

"The space scene was the most difficult," Polish said. "Our eyes weren't trained to see what was real and what was fake. We were getting actual, high-definition Earth imagery from NASA and we kept looking at it and thinking it was fake. We had to trick our eyes into believing what was real."

As their own worst critics, the brothers scrutinized these scenes meticulously until they felt they arrived on footage that looked true to real life.

"With the launch, we wanted to mix reality with technology," Polish said. "All the explosions were real. All the wood flying and smoke and fire were practical. We took those and mixed it all with CGI to enhance the rocket. We thought a blend of those two would give it a more natural look."

Farmer nearly fatally crashes and burns with his first launch. For the filmmakers, the scene broke new ground.

"We had nothing to pull from with the wrecked launch from the barn. You've seen lots of shuttle launches but not one coming out of a barn. There was a lot of rendering done. The material on the side of the vessel was very difficult to work with because it was so shiny and how it reflected distorted images. Some of the realness actually looked fake."

While working with technology was a scrupulous adventure that proved to be rewarding for these filmmakers, Thornton is conflicted about modern-day advances and views technology as a double-edged sword.

"Technology really is a 50/50 thing to me," Thornton said. "It's amazing the things we can accomplish with technology. Even with something as mundane as the computer, they used to be the size of a room with blinking [stuff] and patch cords everywhere."

"The good thing is we can communicate so much more easily and the bad thing is we can communicate so much more easily. When there's too much access, it takes away the power and magic."

With the Internet documenting the world's data, Thornton as an actor is annoyed with all the information being amassed about him. He added: "On a personal level, I don't like people being able to look anything up about me. Everywhere you go, it's like people know more about me than I do."

"Technology has depersonalized so much today and given too much access to the magical things you had before. When you saw Jimmy Stewart in a movie before, that was the only time you ever saw him. You couldn't Google him and see him in his house drinking a cup of tea."

"Advances in technology have made us lazier and not as smart in some ways. On the other hand, it's incredible what we can do with medicine and businesses are more efficient."

The Model American Family

The fictitious setting of the film in Story, Texas put the limelight on Farmer's family and his wife and three children. While a successful rocket launch was a zealous goal with omnipotent presence in the family's everyday life, it was equally paramount to achieve completion for the message the act would send to his kids.

With support from his wife, Audrey (played by Virginia Madsen from "Sideways"), Farmer enlisted his son as mission control and removed his two daughters from school to advance his cause. Indeed, Farmer had his whole family dreaming the same dream.

With the image of his character in "Bad Santa" in many people's lobes, Thornton in this film played a husband and family man. The role was designed to be an accurate representation of his beliefs on the institution of family and marriage. Following five real-life divorces and four children, though, it was a tough sell.

"There was concern when releasing this movie about whether people would like him," Polish said. "Once people give this movie a chance,

they see that he’s attractive, he’s solvent, he’s a good dad and it’s more connected to him as a person than any other role. He’s so close to Charlie Farmer and he’s a very strong family man when you see him in private with his family.”



Director Michael Polish on the set of “The Astronaut Farmer”.

Photo by Richard Foreman and courtesy of Warner Bros.

Whether or not you’re convinced of Thornton’s true nature, he is sending a bit of a mixed message playing such a role in a film and living that role differently in reality. He actually envies his Hollywood marriage in the film.

“It would be great to be in a marriage like that,” Thornton said. “I’m not ashamed to say I’ve been married so many times because I was trying. It didn’t work out and it’s better to get out of it than to live in something where no one is happy. There are plenty of people who stay married forever and never look at each other and never talk to each other.

“Just to say you were married for 50 years – if it wasn’t happy – who cares? If you have to get married 10 times, who cares? My view on marriage is not so different from the guy in the movie. I just haven’t happened to have one of those.”

Madsen’s character in the film is as her husband’s rock. After Farmer’s first failed launch, it was her inspiration that motivated him to reconstruct his derelict tin can from scratch and try all over again.



Virginia Madsen plays Audie Farmer.

Photo by Richard Foreman and courtesy of Warner Bros.

With the rocket as a metaphor to any dream and everyone therefore having their own version of one, she equates that turning point in the film to anyone who has ever had a dream and has struggled to realize it.

“After the first crash, he gave up his dream,” Madsen told Adam Fendelman. “Because of that, he was dying inside. His spirit was broken.

That's when the kids and I come back and said he couldn't be broken. It's because of how well I knew him. He was a shell of his former self."

Madsen relates the film's story to her own real life and a familiar entrepreneurial venture within it.

"It's like my sister and her husband," Madsen said. "He's an entrepreneur. His dream wasn't a rocket, but almost as crazy, it was a restaurant. They had a little diner and the kids worked there. Sometimes it was hellish for that family because they were always so close to being broke. Still, they managed to get through.

"The rest of us would sometimes tell them to get rid of that restaurant because it was too much of a struggle. But this was his dream. They all supported him no matter what. My brother-in-law recently saw the movie and he completely identified with the film's story."

In addition to the clear message about living the American dream, the filmmakers are gauging the movie's success not only by how much money is raked in but also by the doors the opportunity can open for the future.

"If Warner Bros. has confidence in you, they leave you alone and let you work. We did this on our own and the business came to us," Polish said. "Success is being able to do our next film. The minute you're in a meeting and someone has the confidence in you to do something bigger and better, that's your success.

"The Astronaut Farmer," which is rated "PG" by the Motion Picture Association of America for "thematic material, peril and language," opened in theaters everywhere on Feb. 23, 2007.



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