

Shoot for the stars

Film focuses on the magic of believing

By **MICHAEL SMITH**
World Scene Writer

I can vividly remember as a first-grader, when the teacher asked what we wanted to be when we grew up, many of the boys proudly proclaimed astronaut as their career of choice.

That was 1971, and the Apollo moon program was in full gear, but it was a pretty cool dream. Believing anything was possible was something you were encouraged to do at age 7.

For Charles Farmer, the dream never dies in "The Astronaut Farmer," a warm family film that's better than most thanks to solid performances, audience good will and a belief that dreams know no age limit.

Farmer (Billy Bob Thornton) is just that, a Texas rancher running cattle on 350 acres, something he's been doing ever since his father's death several years ago left the place in deep debt.

That forced Farmer, an acclaimed Air Force pilot, to drop out of the NASA astronaut program, but it didn't stop this space cowboy from believing that he could fly to the moon.

Or at least orbit the earth a couple of times in a rocket he's been building in the barn. It's a big barn. There's a retractable roof. You have to see it.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that writer-director Michael Polish is pushing the limits of believability here, but that's the point of the film: Believe.

The people who love and support him — wife Audie (Virginia Madsen), two daughters and 15-year-old son Shepard (as in Alan) — never stop believing.

Their faith in him is tested, but they still believe.

Meanwhile, the federal government provides much of the film's comic content, portrayed as the dream police, killers of Farmer's entrepreneurship.



Billy Bob Thornton stars with Logan Polish in "The Astronaut Farmer."

RICHARD FOREMAN / Warner Bros. Pictures

It turns out you just can't buy 10,000 gallons of rocket fuel anymore without raising suspicion.

The feds are worried about a civilian launching a rocket as a homeland security threat. The people of the small, rural town are less concerned than they are divided: Is Farmer a hero or a head-case?

The bank is breathing down his neck, too, with foreclosure on the ranch looming.

The filmmakers employ a good measure of schmaltz and shamelessly set up the rocket man with all of the dream-crushing road blocks you can imagine. But the good-natured affability of the whole thing works.

We've all had dreams we've pursued, some attained, some not. Many have had those aspirations cut short by people telling us to move on, grow up, get over it.

Polish's screenplay creates a believable world, with a bucolic setting and a loving family that's so normal that the launching of a rocket from a Texas farm is no more outrageous than the inevitable media circus that surrounds the place.

But inside the fenceline is a place where a vision can run free, where dad wearing a silvery retro spacesuit seems natural, where families still gather around the dinner table and support one another.

These people are serious about this endeavor, and Thornton and Madsen pull off these actions flawlessly.

The movie is successful at inspiring in a quiet way, and one might recall "October Sky" as a model for this quality.

movie review "THE ASTRONAUT FARMER"

Stars: Billy Bob Thornton, Virginia Madsen, Tim Blake Nelson

Theaters: Palace 12, Tulsa, Starworld 20, Owasso, Riverwalk and Cinema 8 (Broken Arrow)

Running Time: 104 minutes

Rated: PG (thematic material, peril and language)

Quality: ★★★
(on a scale of zero to four stars)

But it also enjoys wagging a finger at government bureaucrats and anyone else telling the rest of us, "Hey, you there being different, why can't you just act like everyone else?"

"The Astronaut Farmer" stretches the bounds of credibility throughout the film, but buying into the premise is part of the magic.

The best part of realizing a dream can be accomplishing something that everyone thought was beyond possibility.

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Fiddle-dee-dee

Local sisters advance in national television contest

By **MATT ELLIOTT**
World Scene Writer



The Pendleton Sisters

The Pendleton Sisters have become the second Tulsa-area music group to win national attention on the CBS "The Early Show" music video segment, "Living Room . . . Live! Kids." The segment invites young performers to submit video tapes, which are aired on "the Early Show." Viewers then can vote online for their favorite.

The girls, 13-year-old Emma Jane and 12-year-old Marina Pendleton, performed the song "Cotton Patch Rag" on their fiddles. The voting viewers picked the Pendletons' tape over the competition, which included a 6-year-old pianist playing music from the "Nutcracker" and a New Jersey blues band.

The girls advance to the next round Monday, when facing two teenage singers from the Carolinas, said their mother, Virginia Pendleton.

"We were really excited," Marina said, describing the moment the girls found out they were winners. "We were kind of jumping around and screaming for a minute."

The girls hope they make it as far as Coweta metal band Crooked X, which has advanced to the "Ultimate Finals," with its taped performance of an original song "Death of Me."

Viewers can vote on their favorite clips at www.cbsnews.com, or on the Pendletons' Web site, www.pendletonff.com.

Voting starts Monday and ends Wednesday, and viewers can cast an unlimited number of votes.

The girls are thankful for the people who voted for them.

"They really attribute this to all their friends and family who voted for them as well as people that they don't even know," Virginia Pendleton said. "They're really very humbled by the people who voted for them."

The girls play classical music and bluegrass, studying with local renowned fiddler Jana Jae, who might be best known for her many performances on the television variety show "Hee Haw" and as a featured artist with the Buck Owens band, the Buckaroos. The girls also take lessons from Karen Naifeh Harmon.

They will be featured on KVOO, 98.5 FM, Monday morning between 7 and 8 a.m., Virginia Pendleton said.

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Regional colleges vie for chance to play the Kennedy Center

By **KAREN SHADE**
World Scene Writer

As if there weren't enough drama already on a college campus, Tulsa Community College opens its stage space this week for the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival Region VI competition.

Beginning Tuesday, theater students will show their best scripts, designs, scenes and productions from the region — Oklahoma, Arkansas, New Mexico, Louisiana and Texas.

The festival, which concludes next Saturday, is a week of workshops and opportunities. Students audition for employment, scholarships, summer stock and graduate school and have an opportunity to network. Seven schools chosen from state contests also will present their work for a chance to perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Those schools are the University of Arkansas, Fort Smith, Ark.; Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas; Oklahoma City University; Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark.; Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in Miami; Sam Houston State University, in Huntsville, Texas; and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

A \$21 all-festival pass includes seven productions at the VanTrease Performing Arts Center for Education on the TCC Southeast Campus, 81st Street and U.S. 169.

Tickets for individual productions and passes may be purchased at 596-7111 and online at www.MyTicketOffice.com.

Only four shows will make it to the national competition, so there is no guarantee that even the most honored production out of Region VI will go, said Gregg Henry, artistic director of KCACFT.

"It's never happened, but it's conceivable that all four of them could come from one region," he said.

Henry has been on the road to the other seven festivals since January. However, he isn't dropping any hints about the competition thus far. This region's festival is the last before a panel selects the productions that will go forward in mid-April.

"The short answer is we're looking for the strongest work in the country. That can come from new works, it can come from existing plays, it can come from outstandingly produced old favorites or progressively mounted Shakespeare — from anything," he said. "But essentially, it has to be the total package working together — the design, the performances, the direction, the attention to the details of the script."

The productions include: "Grand Canyon" from Sam Houston State University
12:30 p.m. Wednesday in the studio theater

An original comedy challenging notions of time, space and eternity through such figures as Abraham Lincoln, Josef Stalin and Jack Kerouac — traveling the Grand Canyon in a rental car. The show repeats at 3 p.m. Thursday.

"Corrigenda" from University of Arkansas, Fort Smith
8 p.m. Wednesday on the main stage

A woman journeys to find her place in the world in a staging that includes aerial acrobatics, martial arts and other "Cirque du Soleil"-like acts.

"Side Man" from Lamar University
12:30 p.m. Thursday on the main stage

The son of a jazz trumpeter and an alcoholic tells the story



Courtesy

Michelle Green appears in "Corrigenda." The University of Arkansas-Fort Smith production will be performed during the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival this week.

of his broken family and jazz through the 1950s to the '80s.

"Cosi" from Oklahoma City University
8 p.m. Thursday on the main stage

A new theater graduate gets to direct a production of a Mozart opera produced at an Australian mental health hospital in this comedy about confusion and broken dreams.

"Bloody Poetry" from Texas A&M-Corpus Christi
12:30 p.m. Friday on the main stage

Romantic literary greats Lord Byron, Percy Blythe Shelley and Claire Claremont explore virtue and vice only to be outdone by Mary Shelley and her literary monster in the end.

"White Horse Christmas" from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M
8 p.m. Friday on the main stage

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A New York City bartender tries to conjure the spirit of an Irish poet to prove a point, but learns something new himself when the ghost shows up.

"Masses Man" from Ouachita Baptist University
12:30 p.m. Saturday on the main stage

The horrors of World War I reveal the human soul — its strength and weakness — in this work from 1929 that resonates nearly a century later.

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festival KENNEDY CENTER AMERICAN COLLEGE THEATER FESTIVAL

When: Tuesday-March 3 (see story for schedule)

Where: Tulsa Community College VanTrease Performing Arts Center for Education, 81st Street and U.S. 169, main and studio stages

Tickets: \$5-\$21 (individual shows and festival passes), available at the VanTrease PACE box office, 595-7777 and online at www.MyTicketOffice.com. Information is also available at www.tulsacc.edu.

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