

Series shows fears and frailties of astronauts

'The Right Stuff' looks back and up with first US astronauts

By Mark Kennedy

When Hollywood does biopics on musicians, we're used to lots of saucy tales of drugs and rock 'n' roll. Not so much when it comes to astronauts.

That changes with "The Real Stuff", an eight-part National Geographic scripted series that shows the often ugly birth of American space exploration.

"Astronauts are treated like legends in our culture and they're unique in that way," said writer, showrunner and producer Mark Lafferty. "It's kind of a third rail."

He and the show's creators decided to grab the third rail and look behind the heroic veneer of the nation's first clutch of astronauts to show their frailties and fears.

Alan Shepard comes off as a cocky, serial womanizing cad, while John Glenn is a little too preoccupied with his place in history, and Gordon Cooper's seemingly happy marriage is a sham.

"They're not statues. They're real flesh and blood men who did these unbelievable, unimaginable things. But at their core, they're just flesh and blood humans," said executive producer Jennifer Davisson.

The series, which premiered on Disney+ on Friday, opens on May 5, 1961, the day Shepard became the second person — and the first American — to fly in space. It then jumps back three years to the birth of NASA and America's entry in the space race against the Soviets, taking viewers up to that crucial '61 launch.

"The Right Stuff" is a fictionalized dramatization based on actual events and grounded in Tom Wolfe's best-seller of the same name.

Wolfe used literary techniques to draw his characters and sketch settings, finding in the astronauts an inexpressible blend of confidence, skill and machismo — "the right stuff". At one point Shepard says: "Pilots are not modest. Not the good ones, anyway."

The series stars Patrick J. Adams as Glenn, Jake McDormann as Shepard, Colin O'Donoghue as Gordon and Aaron Staton as Wally Schirra. Parts of it were filmed at real NASA locations.

Fans of "Mad Men" will find familiar territory in the classic cars, smoking, knit shirts, Frank Sinatra songs and the strong whiff of white male entitlement. Each of the seven got new Corvettes for just \$1 because the dealership knew what good advertising it would be having them drive their cars.

Moment

"It was a great moment in time to be an astronaut, right? You're a celebrity. You were getting money. You were getting girls. You were getting cars for a dollar. You were getting all this all these wonderful things. But it's never enough," said Davisson.

Davisson and Leonardo DiCaprio, her producing partner at their Appian Way production company, were originally exploring the idea of doing a project around a single American hot dog pilot — Chuck Yeager.

When that fell through, they seized on seven instead — the Mercury

Seven, who left military jobs to create the new category of astronaut. The producers reread Wolfe's book and examined the 1983 film adaptation starring Ed Harris and Sam Shepard, which has a Cold War feel.

"We went back and we looked at the book, and we realized that as wonderful as the original movie is, there's so much story that's left untold. And so we decided to roll up our sleeves and see if we could we could turn it into something," Davisson said.

Lafferty was in many ways the perfect man for the job of shepherding the series since he's been making history come alive for years. He previously examined the computer revolution in the '80 with "Halt and Catch Fire" and worked on "Manhattan", which told the story of the scientists who produced the first atomic bombs. He even wrote about Wolfe in his master's thesis.

"What we tried to do from the pilot forward is to take Wolfe's book, take the movie, take all the research we did and triangulate it all and try to find the essence of the truth in the middle," he said.

There are plenty more stories if "The Right Stuff" series develops an audience. The book and first season ends with Shepard's launch, but there are a handful more Mercury missions, then plenty in Gemini and Apollo, which ends with a man on the moon.

"The plan was always to go up to the end of Wolfe's book and then go way beyond it and to say, 'This can be the launch pad' — no pun intended — 'for a story about NASA and we can go into Gemini and Apollo and so into the future,'" said Lafferty. (AP)

Television

Variety



This image released by National Geographic shows Shannon Lucio (left), and Jake McDormann in a scene from 'The Right Stuff'. (AP)

Film

A story about an unjust system

'Time' a terrific look at pull of loss

By Mark Kennedy

There is a scene in the documentary "Time" that captures a woman on the phone trying to speak to a judge's clerk. She's put on hold. Nothing happens as the seconds tick away. One minute becomes two. The woman is still, waiting patiently. Eventually, she gets through but the call comes to nothing.

Most filmmakers would leave that tedious moment on the cutting room floor, but not director Garrett Bradley, who is making her first nonfiction feature. Her film is precisely about wasted time. "Time" is a story about loss and patience and an unjust system that demands both.

The woman on the phone is Sibil Fox Richardson and she's trying to get her husband released from prison while also raising six boys. "Time" is her story, augmented by video diary entries she made for her husband, locked up in the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Bradley weaves these incredibly intimate videos with her own footage of Richardson and her family, always unrushed. A young son is seen sleeping or putting on socks. The slow pan out from a grandmother's face. A son simply eating. People chatting before an event. All while a lazy piano plays.

"Time" had its world premiere at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, where Bradley was awarded best director for US documentary, becoming the first Black woman to win that prize. "Time" deserves every award it gets: It is terrific filmmaking, augmented by the woman at its center, a formidable and charismatic figure.

Richardson and her husband, Robert, both spent time for the attempted armed robbery of a credit union to help keep their urban clothes store afloat. No money was stolen and the culprits were all first-time offenders. She served three years; her husband got a 60-year sentence in 1999.

This black and white film is not about guilt or innocence. It's about the cost one family has had to bear. Richardson was pregnant with twins when their father was locked up; the film captures them on the cusp of turning 18. "They have no idea what fathers even do," she says.

The filmmakers go back and forth in time, juxtaposing images of 20 years ago with recent footage. Toddlers

become men, men go back to kindergartners. There is always something missing — a husband and a father.

"Time is when you look at pictures of when your babies were small. And then you look at them and you see that they have mustaches and beards," Richardson says. "And that the biggest hope that you have was that before they turned into men, that they would have a chance to be with their father."

The personal gets political as Richardson argues that the national prison system is just a modern form of slavery. "Listen, my story is the story of over 2 million people in the United States of America," she says. She becomes an advocate and a dynamite public speaker. But above all, there is love, an unwavering, fierce love for a man she can only visit twice a month.

Footage

Among the interesting things about Bradley's approach is the film's color palette. She has chosen to strip the home movies of color and present her own modern footage in the same monochrome, giving the different parts of the film a knitted smoothness and timelessness, a wheel that keeps spinning.

The last few moments contain some of the most exhilarating and moving moments ever committed to film and Bradley's reversing of video images — ending with a kiss — is simply gorgeous, poetic filmmaking. "Time" is very much worth everyone's time.

"Time," an Amazon Studios release, is rated PG-13 for language and adult situations. Running time: 81 minutes. Four stars out of four.

The new sci-fi rom-com "Save Yourselves!" is rich in comic timing, but seemingly nowhere more than in its very title, coming in this of all weeks. Unless, of course, you enjoyed the presidential debate.

But there are several layers of meaning to the title, even without that exquisite yet unintentional one. The first concerns the fact that killer aliens descend to Earth, bent on destroying all in their path. So there's that.

The other concerns the relationship at the core of the movie, that of a Brooklyn hipster couple trying to cope with various needs and differences and working

on growing and nurturing their love, much like the yeast starter for their homemade sourdough.

There are many Brooklyn millennial references like that, and luckily most of them hit their mark with a delightful zing, thanks to a crackling script by directors-writers Alex Huston Fischer and Eleanor Wilson, but especially because of the easy chemistry between the terrific leads, Sunita Mani and a hilarious John Reynolds. The plot does get rather confused and trippy in the latter third, but by then we're so charmed by this couple and their creative efforts to save themselves that honestly, it hardly matters.

We begin in the year ... well, "the year humankind lost Planet Earth." So from the start, we sort of know where this is going.

But before the aliens arrive, in the form of cute little furry "pouffes" that resemble comfy footstools, we get to know Su and Jack. Fittingly when we meet them, she's on her laptop and he's on his phone. Technology clearly rules their lives. Typical domestic dialogue: "Alexa, play!" "Alexa, stop!"

Su is miffed, because Jack messed with her tabs on her laptop, and now she can't find her stuff, only Jack's articles on baking bread. She asks for an apology. He obliges. "What are you apologizing FOR?" she asks, as if to a child. "That thing you want me to apologize for," he says. You can tell they go down this road all day long.

But the couple is working on bettering themselves, and one evening at a party, they meet a friend who owns a remote cabin upstate. They take him up on his offer of a week away from it all. They decide to cut off all technology, and won't communicate with anyone. They settle in for a week of hiking and canoeing and making lists like "How to Be a Better 'We.'"

And then, as if cutting off iPhones and iPads for a week weren't scary enough, there's that alien invasion thing.

But hey, these are tough times. A diversion like "Save Yourselves!" might just save your week.

"Save Yourselves!", a Bleecker Street Films release, has been rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America, "for language." Running time: 93 minutes. Three stars out of four. (AP)

LONDON: Britain's Royal Opera House is selling a David Hockney painting of its former chief to help it stay afloat as coronavirus-related restrictions keep many UK performing arts venues shuttered.

Christie's auction house said Monday that "Portrait of Sir David Webster" will be offered for sale in London on Oct 22, with an estimated price of between 11 million pounds and 18 million pounds (\$14 million and \$23 million).

Hockney, one of Britain's most renowned living artists, painted the portrait in 1971 after Webster stepped down as the company's general administrator. Webster died later the same year.

Royal Opera House chief executive Alex Beard said the company was facing "the biggest crisis in our history."

He said proceeds from the sale "will be used to ensure that the world's greatest artists can once more return to our stages, to sustain our community of artists through this period, and to ensure we can continue to delight audiences for decades to come with extraordinary ballet, dance, music and opera."

He said the company, home to Britain's Royal Opera and Royal Ballet, would also need to cut staff and costs and seek funding from supporters and Britain's Conservative government to stay afloat.

British theater and music venues are struggling to survive because social distancing rules mean most can't reopen with enough audience members to break even.

The Royal Opera House is currently offering streams of past opera and ballet productions and hopes to hold a few performances before limited live audiences later this month. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: It's official. Every time residents of Danbury, Connecticut, flush, they will be sending their special deliveries to the John Oliver Memorial Sewer Plant.

The City Council voted 18-1 to rename the sewage plant after the comedian, who began a tongue-in-cheek battle with Danbury when he went on a rant against the city on HBO's "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" in August.

Mayor Mark Boughton didn't waste any time responding on social media. He posted a video of himself at the sewage plant saying

the city was going to name it after Oliver.

"Why?" the Republican mayor asked. "Because it's full of crap just like you, John."

That drew a delighted response from Oliver, but he went off against the city again because Boughton later said he was just joking.

Oliver upped the stakes on his Aug 30 show by offering to donate



Beard



Oliver

\$55,000 to local charities if Danbury actually followed through with renaming the plant.

"I didn't know that I wanted my name on your factory but now that you floated it as an option, it is all that I want," Oliver said.

Boughton has said that the feud has been a good distraction from the coronavirus and other troubles of the times. He also said Oliver's

promised donations have helped spur local fundraising efforts for area food banks that could end up collecting a few hundred thousand dollars to feed needy families.

The mayor added he will be offering tours of the sewer plant for \$500 donations to local food pantries.

"I think it's been a home run. It's been a lot of fun," Boughton

said of the spat. "If I can put food on people's table for Thanksgiving by naming a sewer plant after a very popular comedian, we'll do it all day long."

Oliver has offered to provide the new sign for the plant that includes his name, as well as attend the ribbon-cutting. Boughton said. A timeline has not been finalized. (AP)

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