

The Definition of Dreaming: Behind the scenes of "The Astronaut Farmer"

By **DANIELLE ELLIS**

The FBI, CIA, FAA, and the U.S. military are out for Charles Farmer. Farmer, played by Billy Bob Thornton, has captured the attention of many by doing the impossible, building a rocket in his own barn. This heart warming family drama depicts him as a local farmer with big dreams and little pockets as he goes broke following his vision of being an astronaut. An inspiration to the community, but a menace to the government, Farmer stands upright with the help of his wife Audie, played by Virginia Madsen, and his three children. The lesson of never giving up no matter the odds displays the strength of a little motivation called a dream.

"The story was sparked by our interest in space exploration, but beyond that it is about a need to dream of adventures, whether it's Neil Armstrong or Lewis and Clark," said Michael Polish, co-writer and director of "The Astronaut Farmer."

The struggle of chasing your dreams is known all too well by the Polish Brothers. Mark and Michael Polish are identical twin brothers who have made a career out of writing and producing independent films. Mark, a writer and producer and Michael, a writer, producer and director have won multiple awards for their success in their three previous films.

Billy Bob Thornton, who is also an award winning-performer, spoke highly of the Polish Brothers. In fact, their brilliant writing style and humor drew Thornton to the film "The Astronaut Farmer."

"I loved the script. I love the Polish Brothers," said Thornton. "They inject a lot of humor into their films. It does-



n't matter if it's a drama or not and I knew they were going to do that." Although Thornton said his dream as a child was to be the pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals, he knew how to play an astronaut from his previous role in the film "Armageddon." This drastically reduced his preparation for his current role. "I just asked the Polish Brothers whenever I needed to know something," said Thornton.

The film has been in the making since 2002 when the Polish brothers drew up an outline of the movie. By 2005 when they picked it back up it only took six months to write because they knew what type of connection they wanted to make with the audience.

"The writing process was relatively easy" said Mark Polish, "We made a conscious decision to form an emotional connection with the audience which is much easier to write because it had a lighter appeal." They also knew who they wanted to play the lead role as Charles Farmer.

The script was concrete by the time the Polish brothers had selected Billy Bob Thornton for the role as Charles Farmer. "We needed an actor that knew how to get it done," said the Polish Brothers. "This caused for less takes and a lighter load for the budget, which was about 12 to 13 million dollars. He is strong, subtle, endlessly impressive- it is a rare blend."

Thornton, as in his other movies, highlights the film's witty undertones with his charisma. When asked about his relationship with the other cast members he laughed and started to reminisce about some of his friends on set, including Bruce Dern, Bruce Willis, and Rick Overton. "When you are working



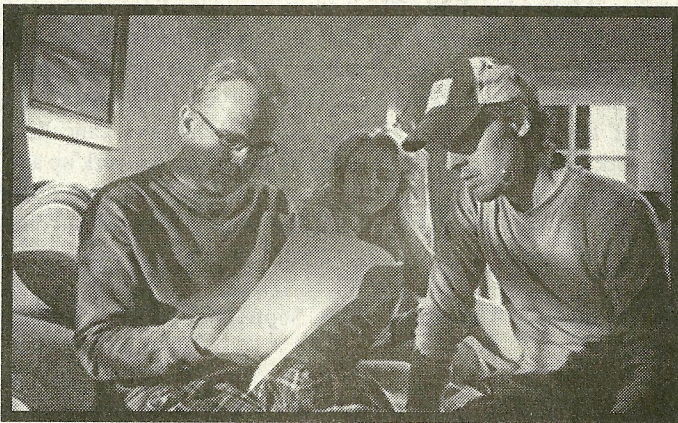
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with friends, it is already built in and it is like a vacation together because we don't get to see each other back home that much...it was fantastic," said Thornton.

The strong supporting wife, Audie, is played by Virginia Madsen, who has been nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe. "Audie is the heart and soul of the movie, as both the loving and supporting wife and a fierce advocate for her family," said Paula Weinstein, the producer. Like the Polish brothers, Madsen drew inspiration from her family. Madsen's sister who has been married for 30 years gave her knowledge of what "real partners" are supposed to be like.

The location for the film was in Las Vegas, New Mexico which represented the character's fictional home in Story, Texas. When asked why they had not filmed the movie in Texas, the Polish brothers said, "We originally wanted to film

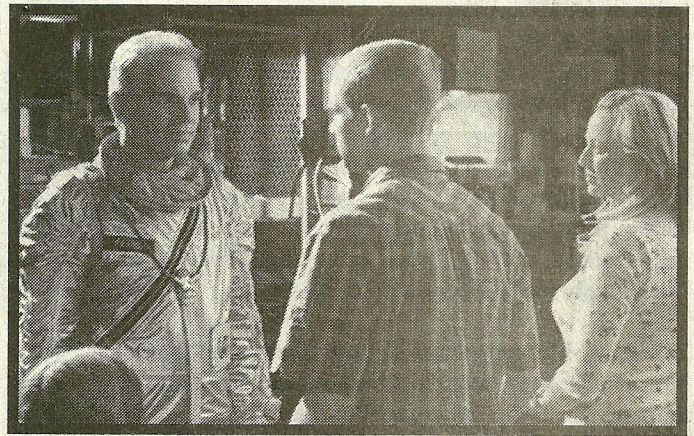


in Texas, but there were too many back to back productions in that place so we found what we needed elsewhere."

The overriding factor in this film is family. Mark and Michael Polish disclosed that the character of Charles Farmer is actually based on their own father. "We grew up watching him do and build anything he wanted," said Michael. Mark added, "He never underestimated what we could do if we set our minds to it." Not only is it shown in the story line, but in the cast as well. The two daughters in the movie, Stanley and Sunshine, are actually Michael's 7-year-old daughter, Jasper, and Mark's 4-year-old daughter, Logan.

Contrary to public belief, Thornton is a family man too. When asked what influences him to make movies such as "The Astronaut Farmer," Thornton's answer was his children. With two sons who are 12-years-old and 13-years-old and a daughter who is 2-years-old he said, "What a great thing it is for my boys who are 12 and 13 to see me play an astronaut and my little girl to be able to see a movie that does not have any violence in it."

When asked what the Polish brother's wanted their audience to take from their film they jokingly answered, "A goody



bag!" Most of all they want their audience to be thoroughly entertained without being overly cynical about what is going on. More specifically, "We want them to enjoy a movie that reminds them it's o.k. to feel good."

What is next for Thornton and the Polish Brothers? Thornton is working on a new film called "Mr. Woodcock," which according to Thornton is about a young man who returns back to his hometown to stop his mother from marrying his evil high school gym teacher. He also has a record coming out on May 8th entitled "Beautiful Door."

As for the Polish Brothers, "Warner Bros. Pictures has picked up two of their movies which the Polish Brothers will write, direct, and produce called "Loot" and "How Time Flies," according to The Hollywood Reporter.

"Building a rocket in your barn might be a stretch but that's the definition of dreaming," reflects Michael Polish. This inspirational guide to following your dreams launches its way into movie theatres on February 23.



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