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## **FILM REVIEW; Sci-Fi Slapstick, With Spacemen Bursting Into Song**

By **ELVIS MITCHELL**

The unremittingly eccentric science-fiction musical "The American Astronaut" is not a picture that is likely to have you walking out of the theater murmuring that there's nothing else like it. What you may say after sitting through it is that you've never seen so many kinds of leftovers crammed between the same two slices of bread. Its purview is emphatically perverse, a salute to the Midnight Movie, a cultural land mass that spawned John Waters and David Lynch.

"Astronaut," which soars as much as it crashes, made the rounds on the film festival circuit this year, and it's easy to see why none of the mini-majors or ersatz boutique studios picked it up; they wouldn't have known what to do with the kinds of reactions this singular film causes. (It is being released by Artistic License Films and BNS Productions.)

"Astronaut" offers some musical conventions, like characters breaking into original songs that boom with feelings and thoughts. (The music was created by the Billy Nayer Show, Cory McAbee's performance art-pop ensemble. Mr. McAbee is also the writer, director and star of the film.) Although it's packed with romantic songs about love as an ideal, it consigns women -- who are mostly unavailable in this boys' treehouse of a future -- to existence on a separate planet.

The men are hardscrabble working Joes who wouldn't be out of place in "Paint Your Wagon." Mr. McAbee uses "Astronaut" as a way to deconstruct and celebrate the corniness of science-fiction epics and musicals; it is evocative of the disconcerting hybrid of musicals and crime fiction in Dennis Potter's "Pennies From Heaven."

Mr. McAbee plays the spaceman-trader Samuel Curtis, who moves commodities around the galaxy, dropping off one and picking up another. As he transports a specialized item, he's trailed by the madman Professor Hess (Rocco Sisto), a murderer who, as they say on daytime television, has issues.

Samuel's peregrinations take him to a couple of mining planets that exist primarily in bad fantasy pulp fiction -- except for the bars in these worlds, which seem as if they might belong in a Samuel Beckett version of a science-fiction novel. (Mr. McAbee may have named his character after Beckett, for the Three Stooges absurdist ambience of "Astronaut" seems to have been inspired by that author.)

In his travels Samuel runs into his old pal the Blueberry Pirate (Joshua Taylor), the Boy Who Has Seen a Woman's Breast (Gregory Russell Cook) and the Old Man (the seasoned pro Tom Aldredge, who holds the film in the palm of his hand during a freaky-deaky monologue).

Mr. McAbee slings plenty of hash in this low-budget, no-tech black-and-white spectacular, and that's not meant as a backhanded compliment. A lot of "Astronaut" is spectacular: much of its luster comes from W. Mott Hupfel III's cinematography, which has a bare-bones poetry. But sometimes "Astronaut" is infuriating. It flops around, a result of intentions that are strictly out of the cult-film school of moviemaking: portentous, self-mocking dialogue; a whole-hog embrace of cheap, arch vulgarity; and acting right out of a dinner theater production of "The Iceman Cometh."

"Astronaut" is also just as woman-hating as "The Iceman Cometh," though 20,000 leagues more amateurish. The misogyny grows out of the film's nod to a forgotten tradition: a no-girls-allowed approach. In another throwback, the movie takes place on tacky sets that would make the B-pic master of tawdriness Ed Wood grind his gums in envy. "Astronaut" plants a loving peck on the cheek of such hoary customs from the glory days of science fiction.

But despite such clumsiness, "Astronaut" has moments of inspired dementia. An early song-and-dance number that starts off like a showdown out of a Sergio Leone movie and somersaults into what can only be described as slapstick Brecht is nothing short of phenomenal. It's followed by a shockabilly number. In such musical sequences, "Astronaut" smashes the claustrophobic parameters of science fiction and makes the numbers an organic part of its vision. It's a terrifically enjoyable piece of filmmaking that demands that you laugh while your jaw drops; you'll never see George Lucas try anything like this anymore.

But during scenes weighted with underwhelming acting, "Astronaut" seems determined to undo the happy gasps in the audience. Although Mr. McAbee is a rare talent, his performance isn't quite up to what the movie needs; he seems to have stepped right out of the old parody "Flesh Gordon." If part of a director's job is problem-solving, however, then he manages to find some of the most pleasurable and creative work behind the camera you're ever likely to see.

#### THE AMERICAN ASTRONAUT

Written and directed by Cory McAbee; director of photography, W. Mott Hupfel III; edited by Pete Beaudreau; music by the Billy Nayer Show; production designer, Geoff Tuttle; produced by William Perkins, Joshua Taylor and Bobby Lurie; released by Artistic License Films and BNS Productions. At the Angelika Film Center, Mercer and Houston Streets, Greenwich Village. Running time: 92 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Cory McAbee (Samuel Curtis), Rocco Sisto (Professor Hess), Gregory Russell Cook (the Boy Who Has Seen a Woman's Breast), Annie Golden (Cloris), James Ransone (Bodysuit), Joshua Taylor (the Blueberry Pirate), Tom Aldredge (the Old Man), Peter McRobbie (Lee Vilensky), Bill Buell (Eddie)

and Mark Manley and Ned Sublette (Henchmen).

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