



Film Review

First Man

By Maxwell M. Lyons

Everyone knows the name Neil Armstrong; the American hero, the first man on the moon. What he did is known the world over, a cornerstone in the history of man, but who he was as a person and how he came to be the interplanetary icon is a tale much less renowned. *First Man*, directed by Damien Chazelle and starring Ryan Gosling as the man himself, recounts the life of Armstrong and the events leading up to the first cosmic “leap for mankind”.

For those familiar with Gosling’s acting history, the emotionally binary persona of Armstrong may seem a far cry from the mean, but rest assured it is well within his impressively diverse acting repertoire. The performances of both Gosling and co-star Claire Foy, playing Armstrong’s wife Janet, were nothing short of impeccable, though neither character portrayal would be considered ostentatious; their depth of character was more subtle. Armstrong (true to life) had a very calculating and stoic demeanour, and though sentimentally discerning lacked the expressive capacity to show it, leaving much of the emotional burden to Janet. Whilst this display of authenticity is refreshingly humanistic and provided insight into the couple’s dynamic it shrouded a false pretence of detachment over the dramatic nature of events occurring in parallel – more on this later.

Supporting cast were respectable, if unnoteworthy, with rather shallow character portrayals – not the fault of the actors/actresses per se, the movie just predominantly lacked character development beyond the leading roles, with supporting characters acting as little more than filler, plot-devices, and/or for biographical accuracy. A prime example of this was Buzz Aldrin (Corey Stoll) who, despite being considered unequivocally pivotal to the Gemini/Apollo mission projects (even more so than Armstrong himself), saw all of about 5-minutes of screen time in the near 2.5-hour runtime. Not only that, but for reasons both narratively unexplained and unnecessary Aldrin’s character is portrayed as antagonistic for the most part, though this amounts to nothing in the plot nor any dynamic between characters – despite the smallest of tensious interactions earlier in the movie, there was seemingly no apprehension (or character relationship at all) between the two men aboard the Apollo 11 shuttle. I understand the focus of the film was clearly on Armstrong himself, but the lack of character depth in the supporting roles made for a narrow scope in execution. This was but one of many narrative shortcomings, unfortunately.

As mentioned above, the expressive imbalance between Armstrong and his wife detracted from the drama the movie saw itself

as. Rightly so, there were many tragedies throughout all stages of NASA’s near decade-long lunar ambitions, all for what was essentially a d--- measuring contest between USA and Russia. In hindsight, it’s easy to reflect on the endeavour with rose-coloured lenses, but real people suffered harrowing fates of trauma, injury, and death. *First Man* does try to highlight this point – the questions of “Why?” and “Was it really worth it?” – but it ends up being lost amongst all the other “drama” in Armstrong’s life, itself deprived of the authentic gravity the real-world events encompassed. Put simply, the dramatic narrative felt disconnected, and it was hard to invest in any one incident as they all felt so surface level and isolated it was ultimately boring. The inconsistent and often unclear pacing and timeframe of events only served to compound the ennui.

If there is but one redeeming quality to *First Man* it is hands down the cinematic experience it marvels. The cinematography is masterfully shot, with digital effects added in post-production to artificially age the film (adding noise and a touch of oversaturation) bringing to life the era in which it portrays. The final scenes of the film (the moon landing), however, transitions to shots taken using an IMAX camera. It’s an experience like no other and leaves you in a state of awe as you experience the breathtaking atmosphere of the lunar landscapes. To top it all off, the implementation of CQI was seamless throughout and truly unified the practical and digital cinematic aspects. My only gripe is perhaps a slight over-reliance of close-up shots, though I assume this was to try to add a sense of emotion to what was an otherwise lacklustre “drama”.

First Man was a conflicting watch. The lead roles were masterfully acted, and the cinematic experience was something to be revered. Unfortunately, ever enjoyable aspect of the film’s composition was undermined by a dramatically stale narrative making for a terribly paced bore of a watch. At 2-hours 20-minutes, I’m not sure I would recommend the time investment – Gosling and Foy are brilliant, but you can see equally outstanding performances in better movies from their filmography; the cinematography is remarkable but perhaps not worth the time investment; and at the very least if you were hoping to learn more about NASA’s Gemini/Apollo lunar projects you’d be far better off reading the Wikipedia page. An exceptionally well-made bore of a watch and one I doubt I’ll be sitting through again.

First Man will be released in cinemas Australia-wide on October 11, 2018.

Movie:

First Man.

Director:

Damien Chazelle.

Starring:

Ryan Gosling.

Claire Foy.

Jason vClarke.

Kyle Chandler.

Corey Stoll.

Genre:

Drama. History.

Rating:

M.

Running time:

141 Minutes.