



Farmer [Billy Bob Thornton] inspects *The Dreamer*, his homemade rocket.

Photos by Rick and Foreman. © Warner Bros. 2007



THE ASTRONAUT FARMER

Set Decorator **Marcia Calosio SDSA**
Production Designer **Clark Hunter**
Warner Bros.

When life's circumstances require astronaut *Charles Farmer* [Billy Bob Thornton] to go home to save the family farm, he doesn't let the dream of reaching outer space die. Instead, he spends the next decade building his own rocket in the barn. His unwavering commitment inspires his family toward a common dream. *Farmer* knows this is his only chance, not only to reach his goal of breaking through the Earth's atmosphere but also to instill in his children the courage to pursue their own ideals and never give up, no matter the odds...

No matter the odds, Set Decorator Marcia Calosio SDSA has been successfully pursuing her dream of being able to work as a set decorator in her favorite environs, the great southwest.

She and Production Designer Philip Dagort created sets in Bisbee, Arizona, for the Emmy nominated and ADG Award-winning STEPHEN KING'S DESPERATION. The film TRADE [See page 76] shot in and around Albuquerque, New Mexico. And the rolling hills outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico, provided an incredible setting for a film about an incredible dream,

THE ASTRONAUT FARMER.

Production Designer Clark Hunter had worked with Actor/Producer Billy Bob Thornton on several projects including ALL THE PRETTY HORSES, filmed at the Hughes Ranch. The spacious, panoramic site also worked well for THE ASTRONAUT FARMER because of its perfect combination of easy accessibility and middle-of-nowhere atmosphere.

"A farmhouse and barn were already on the property, but both were empty hulls built only as exteriors for another ►



Mission Control



Shepard's Bedroom

movie,” says Hunter. He and Calosio created all the interiors for the house and raised a new “old” barn large enough to accommodate a 50-foot rocket and a farm cum aerospace engineering workshop.

Calosio describes, “The Hughes Ranch was truly one of those dream locations with magnificent 360 degree vistas, rolling hills, massive cottonwood trees and a natural spring-fed lake. Next to the lake was a beautiful farmhouse with a wrap-around porch. It didn’t matter which window you looked out of, there was a spectacular view, but the house was completely gutted inside. Clark did a fantastic job reconstructing the interior, and my crew and I created the ‘home’ inside. We envisioned a nurturing atmosphere of solid, wholesome family values, generation after generation, typical with farm families.”

“*Shepard's Bedroom* depicts his passion for space exploration. He's truly his father's son,” explains Calosio. “We covered one whole wall with a close-up mural of the moon

and included lots of space-related projects, model rockets and books on cosmic exploration. A telescope was positioned at the window where night after night *Shepard* would study the stars and dream.”

Never Give Up

Calosio points out, “I suppose the ‘Never give up!’ message in the film applies to any show we work on. There are always impossible odds, but somehow, some way, things always work out and are finished in time. When I first read the script, I thought, ‘How in the world are we going to pull this one off?’ We started intensely researching Atlas–Mercury rockets and capsules and, with help from the NASA archives, other national space agencies and various museums, we were able to piece it all together to make it believable.”

“There were not a lot of resources in New Mexico for that sort of dressing,” she smiles, “except for a wonderfully bizarre place in Los Alamos, about an hour outside of Santa Fe, called ‘The Black Hole.’ The owner is a former Los Alamos National Laboratory employee who has accumulated 50 years worth of remnants, artifacts, surplus and salvage of the nuclear age. We found more dressing there than we could have hoped for. With our extensive research, we were able to piece it all together to make it seem believable.”

“It was imperative that the rocket be built as nearly to scale as possible,” states Hunter. “For the skin, we used a company that makes skins for 747s. We built it in sections, then stacked them up and fastened them together.”

Size Does Matter

There are times that size does matter. Calosio shares, “My contribution in terms of the rocket was bringing in an actual full-size Atlas rocket engine on loan to us from the Kansas Cosmosphere in Hutchinson, Kansas. We had it trucked into Santa Fe and then moved it to and within the set with a crane. In the story, *Farmer* acquires it and salvages pieces from it to make his own rocket.”

“The look in and around the barn was a combination of scavenged parts from old tractors and farm equipment along with everyday tools one would find on any farm. There was nothing specialized, just basic broken-down pieces of farm equipment that were improvised upon to build the rocket. *Farmer* proves that with his knowledge of technology and training he could substitute parts to make it work. Everyday items take on a double meaning,” says Calosio.

She recalls, “The entire production crew was astonished at the finished rocket, a huge gleaming 50-foot rocket structure set inside a well-worn old barn with a retractable roof section that would allow it to launch into space. There was quite a visual contrast between the high-tech rocket and the surrounding barn dressing.”

The companion piece to the rocket barn was *Farmer's Mission Control*, the control room containing all the computer

Farmer [Billy Bob Thornton] and his father-in-law [Bruce Dern] go over the rocket blueprints in *Farmer's Rocket Barn*.



Photos by Rick Freeman © Warner Bros 2007

and technical apparatus that his son *Shepard* would use to help launch and then monitor the craft's orbit. "It was an old Air Stream trailer," Hunter relates. "We packed in a lot of vintage gadgetry and 1960s technology intermixed with modern computer equipment in a kind of Rube Goldberg design, which is what it might realistically look like if he had collected and integrated everything in bits and pieces over the years." Colosio adds, "We also outfitted the roof with groupings of antennae and dishes to track Farmer's orbit attempt. The whole *Mission Control* set was a blast to create."

Dreams

"In fact, the entire film was a joy to do," she states. "The Polish brothers, who wore many hats as writers, director, actor and producers, were wonderful to work with, very committed and

involved, yet always open to new ideas and thoughts. Michael Polish said, 'This story is about the fulfillment of dreams against all odds. I think that is something everyone might want to do, but not everyone is willing or able. Building a rocket in your barn might be a stretch, but that's the definition of dreaming.'"

Calosio's parting thoughts on the film and the experience of making it include, "I learned that almost anything is possible if you have enough desire, passion and dedication.... And don't be afraid of failure!"

"We had loads of fun on this film, not only because of the storyline but also because I had my wonderful crew with me. They loved creating set pieces from salvaged items with the same intensity and passion that *Farmer's family* had building their rocket. Clark Hunter was a dream to work with. We had a great team. Every day was a day filled with laughter in one of the most beautiful settings in northern New Mexico. I don't think it gets any better than that." ■