

MOVIES

'The 11th Green': Film Review | Palm Springs 2020

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THE BOTTOM LINE

A thoughtful and compelling what-if, starring a never-better Campbell Scott. [🐦](#)

Indie writer-director Christopher Munch speculates on UFOs, the space-time continuum, the military-industrial complex and decades of government secrets in a drama starring Campbell Scott and Agnes Bruckner.

According to the intriguingly equivocal disclaimer that opens *The 11th Green*, the "unavoidably speculative" film presents "a likely factual scenario of extraordinary events." Those events run a fascinating gamut — extraterrestrial contact, postwar conspiracies, transcendental philosophy — and include a series of conversations between a dead U.S. president and a living one.

But perhaps the weirdest jolt in Christopher Munch's sixth feature is an amorous moment between Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower. In itself, there's nothing odd about a long-married couple's canoodling. But the matter-of-fact way the scene peers beyond the two-dimensional historical curtain is a bracing example of Munch's fearless knack for casting a new light on official stories — a talent he's brought to such diverse subjects as John Lennon (*The Hours and Times*) and a forgotten California railroad line (*Color of a Brisk and Leaping Day*).

The 11th Green, which received its world premiere at Palm Springs, can at times feel overly packed with information. But that information unwinds with a provocative and illuminating slant, and in combination with the film's eccentric mix of genres, time periods and SoCal desert atmosphere — including a refreshing dash of primitive-verging-on-cheesy sci-fi effects — it makes for a heady revisionist saga. Naturalistic performances enrich the brew, led by a pitch-perfect Campbell Scott as a muckraking journalist who finds himself confronting the deep state on unexpected fronts.

Scott's Jeremy Rudd runs a *Democracy Now*-type alternative-press news operation in Washington with the tough and pragmatic Lila (April Grace). They're in the midst of a charged, high-profile aerospace investigation when he receives word that his estranged father (Monte Markham), a onetime associate of President Eisenhower's, has died, and he heads west to sort out the man's affairs. Jeremy's manual typewriter is not an affectation but an anti-hacking measure; he regards

the world with a suspicious, piercing gaze. That gaze begins to melt in his exchanges with his father's assistant, Laurie Larkspur (Agnes Bruckner, excellent) — a turn of events subtly underscored by the pleasure Jeremy takes in adding "like the flower" whenever he says Laurie's surname. There's a compelling chemistry to the duo's flirtation, highlighted by a beautifully staged first kiss.

But Lila, back in D.C., sees red flags. From a different angle, so does the audience: Laurie's snooping indicates a hidden agenda, with potentially alarming implications. Heightening the tension is the animosity between her and Larry Jacobsen (Currie Graham), a spy who was a protégé of her late boss and is now ultra-eager to show classified footage to Jeremy. Lila worries that Jeremy is falling down a rabbit hole that will discredit their reporting. Like many a character faced with a mystery, he suspects that "it's all one goddamn story." The film builds a convincing case for that hunch.

The drama's variously widening and tightening circles involve UFOs, antigravity planes, defense contractors and the secret wonder of perpetual energy. Munch moves the action back and forth among several time periods, with Jeremy's father's house, previously owned by Eisenhower, the nexus. In that '50s modernist showpiece of glass, wood and stone, we see Ike (George Gerdes) and Mamie (Kathryn Leigh Scott) enjoying their post-presidential leisure and the sweeping views, though he's still dealing, unhappily, with Washington via a secure line.

It's not for nothing that the Palm Desert golf resort where the house is located is called Valhalla: In Munch's scenario it's a virtual hall of the once mighty. Ike's visitors there include a lame-duck president from the story's present day; Obama in all but name, he's played by Leith Burke, who captures the body language and vocal cadences of the 44th president with an assurance and ease that go beyond mere mimicry.

Connecting on the space-time continuum, the two American leaders discuss what the younger man calls "the ET industrial complex" and what his predecessor calls, with biting disdain, the "backroom boys." They're joined by a third, otherworldly figure (Tom Stokes) who, with awkward impassiveness and a swami's preternatural calm, brings a message of love and peace — and offers evidence that even more highly evolved civilizations aren't immune to the grating phenomenon of vocal fry.

Munch's premise rests on the two prexies' assumed integrity, and their flawed humanity. Well past his personal expiration date, a prescient Ike longs to see the release of closely guarded information that would affect the well-being of humankind and the planet. The Obama-like character is on the cusp of realizing Eisenhower's wish, but the drama's idealism is tempered by an understanding of the ways that matters of national security, not to mention personal safety, can trump the best intentions.

The film is dedicated to a lesser-known historical figure, James Forrestal, who in 1947 became the first U.S. secretary of defense, and who would meet a sorry fate two years later. (He's played, hauntingly, by Ian Hart, who toplined Munch's debut feature, *The Hours and Times*). But for all the story's machinations and dark doings — and notwithstanding the racist vitriol David Clennon spews as one of Jeremy's father's commie-hating cronies, or the old-school Republican vibe at Valhalla, with its ridiculously restrictive dress code (denim is verboten) — *The 11th Green* is concerned not with narrowly defined party politics but the power of cabals, and the relative powerlessness of figureheads.

Into the multilayered, many-textured mix, Munch throws newly created newsreels, home movies and TV clips, to strong effect. He and his design team bring superb detail to every aspect of the film — note Mamie's period-appropriate penchant for solitaire (played with *cards*), and the military stars pinned to Ike's PJs.

The writer-director and DP Sara Garth are well attuned to the special light of the desert settings and weave local color — and locals — into the story. Key artifacts from the historical excavation show up in memorable sequences set at Shari Elf's Crochet Museum and Clark Moorten's Cactarium. (The striking centerpiece house, though, is actually located not in Palm Desert, but in the L.A. suburb of La Cañada-Flintridge.)

Trains cut across the landscape and through the story's layers of history, and Mark Orton's score, with its eerie/classical tinges, potently connects the eras and genres. The sharply etched dialogue can at times feel like too much too fast, but in its precision and poetry, the language is alive, and Munch gives each character a distinctive voice. A particularly choice line, delivered with emotion by the usually even-tempered Ike, spins around a colorful turn of phrase that could also describe this odd and elegant mongrel of a movie: "We're all," the long-dead president says, "cosmic mutts."

Production company: Antarctic Pictures

Cast: Campbell Scott, Agnes Bruckner, George Gerdes, Leith Burke, Tom Stokes, April Grace, Ian Hart, Currie Graham, David Clennon, Monte Markham, Kathryn Leigh Scott, Shari Elf, Clark Moorten

Director-screenwriter: Christopher Munch

Producers: Christopher Munch, Valeria Lopez

Executive producers: Linda Brown, Jim Stark

Director of photography: Sara Garth

Production designer: Jennifer M. Gentile

Costume designers: Kristen Anacker, Dandi Dewey

Editors: Nat Carter, Curtiss Clayton

Composer: Mark Orton

Casting director: Tineka Becker

Venue: Palm Springs International Film Festival (Local Spotlight)

109 minutes
