

The 11th Green' Review: Investigating Aliens, Eisenhower and Golf

The director Christopher Munch's first feature since 2011 is both whimsical and dark.



By Glenn Kenny

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The 11th Green | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Christopher Munch | Drama | 1h 48m

Christopher Munch has a near-unique filmmaking voice, possessed of an understatement that can register either as droll or profound, and sometimes as both. He doesn't get to exercise that voice too frequently, alas.

The writer-director debuted in 1991 with "The Hours and Times," an equally bold and sensitive piece of cinematic speculative fiction about the relationship of John Lennon and the Beatles' gay manager, Brian Epstein, and the pair's shared sense of being outsiders. Other pictures in his subsequent, too-sparse filmography show the wide range of his interests; "Color of a Brisk and Leaping Day" was about a post-World War II Chinese-American fighting to preserve a railroad his grandfather helped to build, while 2011's "Letters From the Big Man" dared to take the idea of Sasquatch relatively seriously.

In his first feature since "Letters," Munch considers another American myth, legend, or buried historical fact, depending on how you look at it. "The 11th Green" begins with a beguiling text stating that while much of what you are about to see is "necessarily speculative," the narrative that follows represents "a likely factual scenario." The visuals are eye-opening; a young woman sits by a tall cactus in the desert at dusk, and as the strains of Wagner's Overture to "Parsifal" play on the soundtrack, she happily watches the stars come out, smiling with particular satisfaction when a U.F.O. briefly reveals itself. Flying saucers can't wink as such, but this one practically does.

The woman, Laurie, played with a winning no-nonsense tone by Agnes Bruckner, was the assistant to Nelson Rudd, a former Air Force luminary whose son Jeremy is an investigative journalist. Nelson's residence is at a golf resort at the California/Nevada border, in a house once belonging to Dwight D. Eisenhower. When Nelson — Monte Markham, suitably old-school — dies, Jeremy, an initially buttoned-up Campbell Scott, goes out to look after the estate. The entanglements that ensue are largely surprising, even given that the father and son were estranged along lines both personal and policy-related.

It is not really a spoiler to reveal that one of the many stimulating scenes that follow shows the movie's current president (never named, but a clear Barack Obama stand-in played by Leith M. Burke) engaged in a lively conversation with Eisenhower (George Gerdes) and an extraterrestrial being who bears an incidental resemblance to the hippie Christ spaceman of Larry Cohen's "God Told Me To." The measured tone with which the movie presents its ostensible revelations is more than half the fun; nothing that comes up is ever played as a twist; the aforementioned opening scene shows Munch's hand deliberately.

While there's a good deal of what feels like whimsy here, the movie's overall disposition is a dark one. Its most crucial node lies in its depiction of the struggle and fate of James Forrestal (Ian Hart), the secretary of defense in the first Truman administration, and the film's dedicatee. The Forrestal scenes are meant to elicit shudders, and they do. More to the point, they make Munch's questions stick.

The 11th Green

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 48 minutes. Watch through virtual cinemas.