

Film Review: 'First Man'

First Man

Direction: Damien Chazelle

Screenplay: Josh Singer

Cast: Ryan Gosling, Claire Foy

Length: 141 minutes

Rating: PG 13

It is 1961 and Neil Armstrong (Gosling) has just landed a test flight, with difficulty, in the Mojave Desert, California. He has just piloted the hypersonic rocket-powered aircraft to the edge of the atmosphere and its own technological capabilities.

Despite his dangerous endeavours and awful family tragedy, he emerges inspired by the experience and is accepted into Project Gemini, the second human spaceflight programme at NASA the following year. He has not yet become the legendary first man of the title that we all know today. He certainly couldn't have been without the immeasurable support of his wife Janet Shearon (Foy), and another seven years of hard work, public failure and private trauma lay ahead before that hallowed summer of '69.

As with all great films about events of historic proportions, whether fictional or created from fact, a triumph or disaster, here is a couple at the centre who, either knowingly or unknowingly, will have a profound effect on the destiny of the story.

By following two or more characters, the experience of the epic proceedings reduces to a human scale allowing us to emotionally engage with the lives of the people on screen.

For a story of such magnitude, 'First Man' wisely charts this map by presenting us with a remarkably intimate portrayal of one family and how they cope with the fact that one member may not return from work one day. It reminds us of the willpower

and dedication required of these families when one has a treacherous occupation of the highest profile.

Occurring simultaneously, 'First Man' contrasts the gentility of domestic life with the stress of space exploration by cutting back and forth between them in many scenes. We are also given some idea of the mental and physical challenges endured by astronauts during take-off and re-entry, almost always framed from their perspective in close-up shots, as is much of the film.

When wide shots are used, briefly and sparingly, we only ever see part of the full picture so not to remove us from the shoes of the protagonists. From inside the cockpit, the metal machine groans and screams through incomparable levels of vibrating noise over the several flights featured in the film, some of which are simply agonising.

Although it may be an obvious observation, astronauts must also possess the supreme intellect demanded in order to operate spacecraft. One shot of an over 600 pages document on the physics of rocket propulsion made me feel more unwell than any of the scenes set in orbit.

On reflection, we forget what a colossal battle it was for NASA to place men on the moon because it seems obvious that it would happen one day.

'First Man' recounts in details the many casualties that resulted from this unprecedented enterprise. Meanwhile, as the object of those endeavours, the moon becomes almost a taunting figure moving across the dark sky, shining down on Armstrong every night.

After the assault course of simulations in preparation for the moon landing, Armstrong then has to face a media onslaught of questions. While he internalises all the tension from work, a master of restraint, his wife leaves nobody in any confusion over her thoughts and feelings regarding the Apollo 11

mission, leading to the only real conflict portrayed in the film between the two characters.

And the main event, the Apollo 11 mission, is wonderfully dramatised. It alternates between periods of breath-taking silence and booming orchestral suite, scored by Justin Hurwitz. Archival footage and radio communications, between Mission Control and the spacecraft are used to full effect throughout the film.

'First Man' is an emotive depiction of an uplifting adventure. It is probably the most significant, hazardous and staggering achievement that mankind has ever accomplished, despite it taking place 50 years ago next year.

Expect nominations for the film, Chazelle, Gosling, Foy and Hurwitz at the awards ceremonies in the New Year.

'First Man' is in cinemas now.

7/10