

AirSpace Revisited - Troop Zero

Emily:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum.

While you patiently wait for the start of season five, we wanted to jump back to the early days of the pandemic and rerun one of our favorite movie-minis, Troop Zero, an episode that originally dropped on May 6th, 2020.

We'll be back in just a couple weeks with 10 brand new episodes in season five! Enjoy!

Nick:

Right.

Emily:

Yeah, there was a lot of snot. There was a lot of ugly crying for most of the film. We didn't see the same movie. Just saying. Just need to lay that out there.

Matt:

You're saying, that was on your side of the screen, the snot and the ugly crying, not what you were watching on the screen. Just to be clear for the listeners here.

Musical Intro

Nick:

Welcome to Airspace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Nick.

Matt:

And I'm Matt.

Emily:

I'm Emily.

Nick:

So we are not coming to you from the museum today. We, like a lot of people around the world, have been in our homes for many weeks at this point. And we know that a lot of our listeners have been as well. So we want to start something a little bit different. Not sure if we're going to have a name for this little movie club of ours, but we feel like a lot of people are spending a lot of time scrolling through a lot of menus for video services and we wanted to share some of the things that we've been watching, some of the things that we've enjoyed while we've been watching and kind of dissect a little bit and just kind of have a conversation on what we like and what you might be able to catch now if you want to follow

along from home. So Emily, you brought this film to our attention. Why don't we get started there?
What is Troop Zero?

Emily:

So I was really excited about this movie. I didn't know that there was a space thread going through it, but the short version is this is a movie about a young girl named Christmas growing up in rural Georgia in the 1970s and she's recently lost her mother.

Movie Clip

McKenna Grace:

Last summer, mama gave me this flashlight to signal the aliens. She said, of course, there's life out there. Now, go outside.

clip fades under

Emily:

And one of the way she copes with this grief is she's gotten really excited about space and the universe and communicating with aliens.

clip up

McKenna Grace:

I am Christmas Flint. Human female. I think you'd like me. I think you'd want to be my friend.

Emily:

And she finds out that there's this opportunity to have her voice recorded on this record that's going to go out into space that aliens might someday hear. The rest of the movie is Christmas trying to get her voice on this record.

Nick:

Per Hollywood tradition, of course, she has to enter and win a talent show.

Matt:

Yes, the hero must go on a quest, enlist the help of others, seek a wise advisor and then face their greatest challenge, right? It's like the classic hero's journey.

Musical transition

Matt:

I don't think they could have put together much better cast than what they did because the cast just carried the whole movie. Even the weakest parts of the movie, the cast kind of made those parts come alive and carried it forward.

Nick:

Jim Gaffigan plays Christmas's dad, lawyer dealing with the death of his wife. McKenna Grace plays Christmas Flint, that's the little girl at the center of the story. Miss Raylene is played by Viola Davis and she is-

movie clip

Viola Davis:

No.

Jim Gaffigan:

It'd be office hours.

Viola Davis:

You already owe me back pay.

Jim Gaffigan:

But I'll get it. I'll get it. I mean, it ain't my fault everybody guilty.

Viola Davis:

Ain't my fault you can't get people to pay you.

clip fades under

Nick:

Jim Gaffigan's assistant, the dad's assistant, but I almost didn't want to characterize her as an assistant because of how much authority she has with these characters and in this story. She doesn't feel like anyone's assistant.

clip up

Viola Davis:

I do arsonists, murderers and state prosecutors. Little girls give me the creeps, plus you can't hit them no more. They changed the laws.

Nick:

And her arc is sort of based around a part from being exasperated by Jim Gaffigan's character and caring about Christmas, the little girl in the center of the story, her arc is defined by the idea that she should have been a lawyer herself, but she never chose to leave Wigley, Georgia and go to law school, and that

she's trying to inventory her life and kind of assess what it is in light of this central disappointment. And that kind of sets up the interaction of the story, right?

Emily:

Yeah. I think that does a really good job. And I think this is sort of that moment where I think it's really important to say there are layers in this movie that we could, I at least, could unpack all day long. And I think Miss Raylene really sort of highlights the fact that this movie avoids talking about race in Georgia in the 1970s, but there's this whole, there's these layers about class and there's these layers about power and there's all these other things going on in the movie, but the reason we decided we wanted to talk about it on AirSpace was because of this whole central theme of Christmas's passion with space and science and the golden record on Voyager.

Matt:

Exactly. I mean, before we even started talking about movie reviews and which movies we wanted to cover here, I watched this movie. It was probably one of the first movies that I watched during this self isolation or quarantine or whatever we want to call it. And as the curator who's responsible for all of our museum's robotic space probes, including Voyager, I really wanted to watch this movie. My ears perked up the minute that I heard it included references to the Voyager golden record.

Emily:

So Matt, I only know kind of the basics of how the golden record came to be. I think a lot of people who are into it maybe know the history better than I do. Certainly, you know it better than a lot of people, historian, but who even came up with the idea of putting this sort of cultural data bank on the side of a spaceship.

Matt:

Good question. Yeah. So to put this in perspective, this mission was 10 years in the making or more because it was sort of first in the mid-1960s that scientists realized that, hey, once every 175 years, the outer planets are aligned just right to send a mission out and visit all of the different planets. And if we don't do it now, we're going to miss the chance and you won't get another chance for another almost 200 years.

So it was from that point in the mid-sixties until the launch in 1977, that this mission came together, but it was only in that last year before launch that they started putting together the golden record. It was kind of a last minute addition to the spacecraft, the idea that they should send something culturally significant.

But yeah, so Carl Sagan and Frank Drake had, previous to this, designed a plaque for the spacecraft Pioneer 10, and Pioneers 10 and 11 had flown also out into the outer solar system and had carried a plaque with just a few engraved images that gave an idea of where Earth was in the galaxy and also who lived on Earth. There was an image of a man and a woman, and some of that imagery got carried forward into this record, but with this record format, they were able to include music as well and voices of people.

Nick:

But the idea is there's got to be somebody out there. So if we're going to take the trouble to send stuff into space, maybe we should greet them with the sounds of children from one very small corner of Georgia, and we're going to have this giant contest that's really only open to a few different Birdie Scout troops.

Matt:

And that's really where the film departs from actual history, which is that there was just a small group of people at Cornell and a few people affiliated with them who were out there getting the recordings and finding the music and the images. And like I said, they didn't have a lot of time to work. And so there never was any contest for birdie Scouts, but the idea that there could have been and that those girls could have been competing to get their voices out into space, that's a great premise for a movie. So I give it, you know, good marks for that.

Nick:

So what actually went on the record. Were images, which Matt kind of alluded to, which hadn't really been done before, sounds of Earth, as well as greetings in many, many languages.

Languages from the Golden Record

Nick:

But not necessarily all kids. There were greetings in dozens and dozens of languages, but I think out of deference to the amount of time, they didn't have a lot of those references. And Matt, tell me if I'm right here, we're from the linguistics department at Cornell. A lot of the people who actually appear on the record are people that were known to speak a language that was not already represented and that's how they got there. For instance, the Farsi greeting is greetings to residents of far skies.

Speaking in Farsi from the Golden Record

Nick:

Which I thought was really great and kind of poetic, but this is just kind of a reflection of the idea that all of this came together really, really quickly. And people kind of had some license over the things that they wanted to say, but it wasn't an organized contest.

Emily:

So who was the one who ultimately spoke the greeting for children of planet in English?

Matt:

Yeah. So that first greeting is actually Carl Sagan's son.

Nick Sagan from the Golden Record:

Hello from children of planet Earth.

Nick:

I think it's a little bit suspicious that Carl Sagan's son won the talent show, if that's what you're telling me.

Musical transition

Matt:

One of the things that I really like about this movie is that it's a group of girls that is competing to be on the golden record and a group of girls who are interested in space science.

Nick:

It's also interesting how long the Voyager mission has been going on. Theoretically, Christmas could have been inspired by this golden record contest and by all rights could go on to work on the Voyager program because it is still going after how many, 40 something years now.

Matt:

Yeah. We just celebrated the 40th anniversary back in 2017 at the museum.

Music up

Emily:

That's it for this episode of AirSpace coming to you from my closet.

Matt:

My guestroom.

Nick:

And my daughter's bedroom. Does that sound weird? Our baby's nursery.

Emily:

Our next episode will be the movie Superman, which I've never seen.

Matt:

See, this whole process is like filling in Emily's, the gaps in her pop culture knowledge. It's like 'show Emily movies,' That's what we should call this, 'Make Emily watch movies'

Nick:

And please feel free to submit suggestions on our Instagram page.

Emily:

At Airspace Podcasts.

Nick:

At Airspace Podcast on Instagram. Submit your suggestions now. Airspace is produced by Jennifer Weingart and Katie Moyer, mixed by Tarek Fouda.

Matt:

And a special shout out to Zoom for, I guess, making this possible.

Emily:

And Voice Memos.

Matt:

And Voice Memos! Yes. Voice Memos.

Movie Clip of kids yelling

I am here. I am here. I am here.

Viola Davis:

I'm here.

Jim Gaffigan:

I'm here.

McKenna Grace:

We are here. We're here.

Clip fades under

Audio Logo:

From PRX.