

## FILM REVIEWS

## STOWAWAY

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 56 minutes. Watch on Netflix.

Films set in outer space are often on a quest for meaning, filling the vast unknown of the galaxy with humanity's basest anxieties. "Stowaway," directed by Joe Penna, pushes a crew of space explorers to moral and physical extremes when an unexpected passenger accidentally compromises their oxygen supply. Yet for all the empathy it expresses of its viewers — every character cries onscreen at least once — the film is troublingly removed from human reality.

That's not to say these characters aren't likable or well-rendered by the starry cast. Toni Collette stands out as always, playing a veteran astronaut on her last mission. Anna Kendrick does well as the beating heart of this film, a foil to the stoic Daniel Dae Kim. And Shamer Anderson holds his own as the surprise fourth crew member, though he is given far too little to work with.

Despite its futuristic musings, the film's greatest weakness is its approach to the stowaway. His presence forces the other characters to reckon with whether he should live or die, thus the film asks, "How does anybody make an impossible decision?" What the film should be asking is, "How do two white women and an Asian man, pushed as a crew of space explorers to moral and physical extremes when an unexpected passenger accidentally compromises their oxygen supply. Yet for all the empathy it expresses of its viewers — every character cries onscreen at least once — the film is troublingly removed from human reality."

"Stowaway" may be set in the future, but surely it is not so far removed from the present that these questions should go unanswered.

LENA WILSON

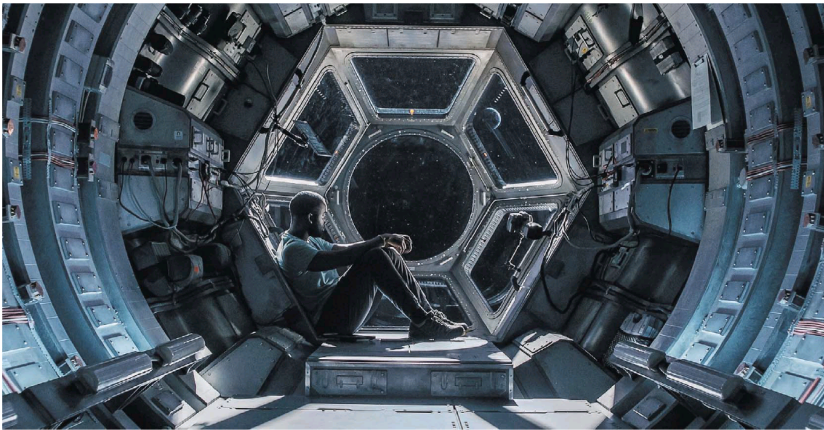
## SISTERS WITH TRANSISTORS

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 26 minutes. Watch through Metrograph's virtual cinema.

This documentary from Lisa Rovner, about women and electronic music, is hardly as gloomy as its title makes it sound. Many of the innovating individuals profiled here contend that women have an affinity for digital technology. And that technology had, and still has, the potential to "blow up the power structure."

Then again, discussing her theme — an electronic instrument that creates sound via hand movements through what looks like empty space — the performer Clara Rockmore says: "You can't play with hammers. You're here to play with butterfly wings." By the same token, Daphne Oram and Della Derbyshire, 1950s and '60s pioneers of synthesizers and tape loops who both worked for the BBC, are conventionally proper and polite as they explain their innovations in archival interviews.

Narrated by the avant-garde musician Laurie Anderson in a voice timbre that blends her performance mode with a more conversational one, this film is informative and often fascinating. It is intriguing to hear the great performer-composer Pauline Oliveros ask, "How do you eliminate the misogyny of the classical canon?" — pointing to a tape recorder as a potential tool. (Oliveros, who died in 2016, also discusses her 1970 New York Times Op-Ed titled "And Don't Call Them 'Lady' Composers.") The short segment the movie gives to Wendy Carlos is puzzling. The very brief, almost allotted to her begins with a French television clip about "Switched-On Bach" and his high sales. This segues into the composer-performer Suzanne Krieger's dismissal of



Shamer Anderson as Michael Adams in "Stowaway," directed by Joe Penna. Adams's presence forces the other characters to reckon with whether he should live or die.



Benjamin Lukowski, left, and Fernando Barbosa in "Tu Me Manques."



Hiroyuki Sanada as Scorpion in the film "Mortal Kombat."

Carlos's work: "The way it impacted the public's consciousness of what a synthesizer was, was completely retroactive." Rovner sees no irony in then chronicling Cann's work in television advertising. GLENN KENNY

## MORTAL KOMBAT

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes. In theaters and on HBO Max. Please consult the guidelines outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention before watching movies inside theaters.

The appeal of the video game Mortal Kombat (and its Coke-Pepsi rival Street Fighter) was combining the characters in different smackdowns. But trying to construct a plot that links them is a fatal trap. The cheesy "Mortal Kombat" (1995), from the video "Resident Evil" director Paul W.S. Anderson, proved as much, and now there is "Mortal Kombat" (2021), directed by Simon McQuoid, a snazzy, marginally more coherent movie that features a less catchy version of the techno theme song. (The soundtrack, like the screenplay, is peppered with catchphrases from



Daphne Oram in the documentary "Sisters With Transistors."

the game: "Test... your might.") The 21st-century "Mortal Kombat" begins in 7th-century Japan, where a great warrior, Hanzo Hasashi (Hiroyuki Sanada), is vanquished and his wife and son killed. Less comes of this than you might expect. Flash forward to the present and Cole Young (Lewis Tan), a cage fighter whose lethal birkmark destined him to compete in a tournament called Mortal Kombat. ("They spelled it wrong," he observes). Before representing "Earthrealm" against Outworld, "the most brutal and murderous of all the realms," he and similarly branded comrades must uncover their inner superpowers.

But with so many characters, the movie spends too much time on discovery and not enough on showing those powers in action. Personally, I wanted more of Sonya Blade (Jessica McNamee) dodging Kano (Josh Lawson) and his laser eye, and I feel chortling at her and her fan club shortchanged accordingly. While the carnage demonstrates some imagination (can ice canisters explode? Did a bat just turn into a table saw?), the riffs, extending even to whether death is permanent, are so arbitrary that nothing matters. Test... your patience. BEN KENGSBERG

## TU ME MANQUES

Not rated. In Spanish and English, with subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes. Watch on virtual cinema.

The Bolivian film "Tu Me Manques" begins with a fight for an absent man's affection. Jorge (Oscar Martínez) was the father of Gabriel, the former lover of Sebastian (Fernando Barbosa). When a chance phone call makes it possible for Jorge and Sebastian to meet, Sebastian is quick to hurl accusations at Jorge, who would not accept his son's sexuality. Jorge has only tragedy to

bring back. Gabriel died by suicide upon returning from New York City to Bolivia.

What follows is an exploration of grief and adoration, as both men try to find a way to honor Gabriel's memory. Jorge travels to New York seeking, and in response, Sebastian gives him a tour of Gabriel's life in the city, introducing him to queer friends and gay nightclubs. The reminiscences lead Sebastian to write a play about his lost love, and the movie uses his theatrical ideas as an interesting, if somewhat alienating, reason to experiment with editing and form. Sebastian hires 30 actors to perform the role of his beloved — a gimmick that is mimicked in the film's flashback sequences, which wrote in different performers as Gabriel.

The film was written and directed by Rodrigo Bellot, who adapted the story from his play of the same name, based on similar events in his own life. Though the movie's aesthetics are tepidly pleasant, Bellot's biggest success is freeing his film's relationship to time. In this sense, the movie retains some of the vitality of theater, where the characters invite the audience into reverie. Sebastian's past, present, future and his fantasies of all three intersect through flash-forwards and flashbacks, weaving together to create a moving and intellectually rewarding testament to queer life and loss. TEO BUGBEE

## WET SEASON

Not rated. In Mandarin, Hokkien and English, with subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 43 minutes.

A beacon of Southeast Asian prosperity and a haven for the ultrarich, Singapore represents a promised land for migrant workers. In "Wet Season," a Malaysian schoolteacher named Ling (Yann Yann Yew) seems to enjoy comfort and stability in her adopted country, yet life in Singapore gnaws away at her dignity. This contrast sets the stage for a reckoning and rebirth by poignant, if morally objectionable, means.

When we first meet our heroine, a soft-spoken but resilient 40-something, she's friendless and taken for granted by just about everyone, which the director Anthony Chen subtly links to her immigrant status. Ling teaches Chinese, but no one seems to take the subject seriously, while a haughty administrator lords his superiority over her by speaking exclusively in English.

Struggling to conceive through in vitro fertilization, Ling privately anguishes as her businessman husband grows conspicuously absent. The couple's relationship screams divorce, but the two stick it out — if only because Ling is her ailing father-in-law's caretaker.

Shot in melancholy blues and grays — and proceeding through Ling's many small tragedies with cool, measured restraint — the film reveals a cup of teenage hormones with the ability of affable chemistry student Wei Lun (Koh Jia Jer), a competitive wushu practitioner obsessed with Jackie Chan. The two — a neglected child and childhood woman — circumscribe the many ways outside of class, as Chen patiently, if predictably, builds toward an abrupt and rather shocking con-

summation.

Wei Lun comes off as one-dimensional in his brash, immature pursuit of Ling, yet her illicit relationship is portrayed in an anti-sensationalist light, blurring the lines between maternal and romantic love. Nevertheless "Wet Season" focuses less on the scandal than what the inevitable fallout can achieve for its floundering protagonists: a bitterweet second shot at life. BEATRICE LOAYZA

## STREET GANG: THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF 'SESAME STREET'

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 47 minutes. In theaters. Please consult the guidelines outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention before watching movies inside theaters.

After more than 50 years, "Sesame Street" still has something to teach us — at least those of us who've grown up with a sense of how it came to be.

The author Michael Davis presented that history in the 2008 book "Street Gang: The Complete History of 'Sesame Street,'" and now the director Marilyn Agreló ("Mad Hot Ballroom") has made a documentary version, which takes full advantage of clips, outtakes and interviews, recent and archival.

Even those resistant to easy nostalgia will find plenty to think about.

As told here, the show's strategy — using television's methods for teaching children ber jingles to teach them the alphabet instead — could only have come together through a combination of figures: Joan Ganz Cooney (a creator of the show and the first executive director of the Children's Television Workshop); Jim Henson, who brought Muppets and just the right amount of reverence; and the workhorse director-writer-producer Jim Stone, whose daughters say he treated the show as his third child.

The show required the input of educators and psychologists and owed some of its freedom to experimentation to federal investment. The movie "Street Gang" never shakes the sense that much of this story has been told elsewhere, but it feels close to comprehensive, and the visual component — watching characters explain the death of Mr. Hooper to Big Bird, after hearing the show's makers explain how they approached the death of the actor, Will Lee — is crucial. There are also some flubbed takes involving Muppets. BEN KENGSBERG

## MY WONDERFUL WANDA

Not rated. In German and Polish, with subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 51 minutes. In theaters and on virtual cinema. Please consult the guidelines outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention before watching movies inside theaters.

Though this film is set against a beautiful and placid Swiss lake, the happenings inside Mr. Hooper's Wegmester-Glor residence unravel a tangled web of relations that unravels into the drama that

"My Wonderful Wanda" (Wanda (Agnieszka Grochowska) is a Polish caretaker who looks after the house's aging patriarch, Josef (André Jung). She bathes and changes him, but at night, she sleeps with him for extra cash that she saves for the two sons waiting for her in Poland. Her story face never betrays any sign of pleasure, but Josef is clearly satisfied; by the second act, Wanda is pregnant with his child.

Bettina Oberli's "My Wonderful Wanda" is, ironically, best when the focus is off Wanda, whose woodenness remains unbreakable throughout. The supporting cast does the heavy lifting: There is Josef, the deceptively vicious father, and the children, Greg, the avipule son, who is as fascinated with Wanda as he is with her, and Sophie, the uptight, imperient daughter. The film's emotional anchor is the matriarch, Elsa (Marthe Keller, who most deserves the title of "Wonderful"). Elsa appears to be welcoming and generous but plays hardball with Wanda over money.

The film, written by Oberli and Cécile Delsaut, satirizes class divides and xenophobia ("the Pole" constantly carries a derogatory connotation here), but never takes the satire far enough to be memorable, challenging or anything beyond whimsical, as Wanda and the Wegmester-Glor negotiate the future of the unborn child. The story also suffers from its division into three acts and an epilogue; it loses emotional momentum with each new section. KRISTEN YOONSOON KIM

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