

# entertainment

## 'The Right Stuff' has it

By WILLIAM CLAIRE  
Brunswickan Staff

*The Right Stuff* pushes the frontiers of the American West into the twentieth century. As the film opens in 1947, the adventure of the open range has come to an end. The only way to go is up.

The hero is test pilot Chuck Yeager (Sam Shepard). Fiercely independent, he is a man alone in a world of crowds and their controllers. In contrast to the stoic honesty and granite integrity of Yeager, a man of the 'right stuff', there are manipulators: a power-hungry Lyndon B. Johnson (Donald Moffatt); the mindless scurry of the press as they close in on the big interview.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, there are the United States' first seven astronauts, spurred on to duty by a governmental desire to catch up and surpass the Russians.

At three hours and ten minutes, *The Right Stuff* is an American ode to the last of a breed, the anonymous adventurer with no need for national glory as motivation. At the same time, the film is a condemnation of a political and social system that creates artificial heroes to achieve its selfish, Cold War objectives.

As one critic has noted, while Yeager demonstrates the 'right stuff' during one of his test flights (in a beautifully dizzying sequence heightening the thrill of flying), the astronauts celebrate it with the public adoration. They become the American heroes; and while their heroics cannot be denied (Would you want to sit in a capsule knowing that the rocket underneath you may explode?), their exploits lack the immediacy the test pilot shares with his environment.

Immediacy of the experience.

Although Alan Shepard (Scott Glenn), Gus Grissom (Fred Ward), John Glenn (Ed Harris) and Gordon Cooper (Dennis Quaid) exhibit brief glimpses of the 'right stuff' during their exploratory space flights, it took them years to get there.

Yeager, on the other hand, lived the 'right stuff'. Leather helmet in hand, he walked out to the airstrip one morning with two broken ribs, climbed into the orange X-1 rocket plane, and broke the sound barrier -- one day after he had agreed to fly the plane.

Written and directed by Philip Kaufman and based on the novel by Thomas Wolf, the duration of the film passes quickly with no lapses into irrelevancy. Each astronaut and four of their wives (Barbara Hershey, Veronica Cartwright, Pamela Reed and Mary Jo Deschenes) are deftly characterized, seeming all too human and frail for the roles cast upon them by the government and *Life Magazine*. Total strangers upon meeting, husbands and wives each develop a strong and special fellowship when they realize the tremendous potential for human error in the space program.

There can be no doubt Kaufman admires the astronauts, as evidenced in the contrast between their realistic portrayals and the goofy satires: vice-president Johnson is a tantrum-throwing child; government recruiters (Jeff Goldblum, Harry Shearer) are village idiots; German rocket scientists relax around a piano singing Lily Marleine; the metaphor of the press as insects driven blindly by instinct is reinforced on each of their appearances by a sound combining the chirp of locusts with three women chewing carrots in front of microphones.

*The Right Stuff* effectively capitalizes on special effects technology. Kaufman depicts an outer space that is real without reminding the viewer of *Star Wars* et al or losing the magical element of space travel. Cloud shots throughout the film, expertly edited for maximum impact, tie together the similarity of the experiences of the astronaut and the test pilot. Whirling higher and higher through continuously changing patterns of white each is awed by the awareness of what is around him.



The Mercury astronauts pose in front of the capsule which they will fly into space in *The Right Stuff*. From left to right: SCOTT GLENN as Alan Shepard, SCOTT PAULIN as Deke Slayton, CHARLES FRANK as Scott Carpenter, FRED WARD as Gus Grissom, LANCE HENRIKSEN as Wally Schirra, DENNIS QUAID as Gordon "Gordo" Cooper, ED HARRIS as John Glenn.

Space is the final frontier. *The Right Stuff* argues that the will of the lone adventurer on horseback must of necessity give way to the overabundance of machined

technology in order to explore outer space. It remains to be seen whether adventurers of future generations will have the 'right stuff' bred out of them as the immediacy of experience and the vitality of individuality become mere historical footnotes.

**I JUST GOT TA DANCE**  
--*Footloose* starts off with strong hints of *Flashdance* during the opening sequence, but quickly degenerates into another young rebel who takes on the system, dates the sweet young thing yearning for adventure and is triumphant on both counts.

The film has bursts of energy, but, with its highly predictable story line, the performance of Kevin Bacon (one of the boys in *Diner*) as the Chicago youth in a Utah small town, and Christopher Penn as a loveable country-bumpkin best-friend, are mere oases in a desert of teens thirsting to dance. The Rev. Shawn Moore (John Lithgow), you see, has banned dancing (for pretty

weak reasons as it turns out).

It is Lithgow who places *Footloose* a cut above the ordinary. As he's done time and again, he puts flesh on what could be laughable characters, planes rough edges from stereotypes and delivers consistently superior performances. For his efforts thus far, he has received two Academy Award nominations for Best Supporting Actor (*The World According To Garp* and this year's *Terms of Endearment*).

Marketed to the high school crowd as a *Flashdance* imitation (it isn't), *Footloose* attracts an audience disinterested in Lithgow's portrayal of a confused, misguided, sensitive man who has forgotten his youth. Hopefully, as a craftsman, his creation was self-satisfying; it wasn't for most of his audience.

**DEAR MAGNUM P.U.**  
--Forget it, Tommy baby, and stick to T.V. You haven't got the Burt Reynolds charm; you lack the energy.

*Lassiter* is your second made-for-T.V. movie, complete with superficial violence, superficial hero, superficial sex, and gratuitous, unrealistic brutality.

There's not much suspense in your two hours as a cat burglar who thinks his crimes aren't really criminal because he doesn't carry a gun. You might want to look at David Niven's 1939 film, *Raffles*, where he played a sophisticated safecracker or *The Pink Panther* ('64) where he spoofs the same character.

Besides, Tommy baby, even Burt Reynolds' version of the deep-down good cat burglar in *Rough Cut* ('80) was a miserable failure. He had a 'surprise' ending too. And if Burt can't do it....

Your film lacks tension until your first effort to retrieve the Nazi jewels earmarked for the German war effort fails. Then, we realize you're in a real jam -- you must outwit cops and Nazis. Unfortunately, the plot degenerates to its early pace in short order.

Tom, you seem like such a nice guy. Why do you make movies that will most likely attract types who will giggle at you in a lady's bathrobe and who believe that smashing a man's head against a wall six or seven times will only result in a mild, red marking on the forehead region just above the eyes?