

## TRAILBLAZERS

*"The Glorias" and "Save Yourselves!"*

BY ANTHONY LANE

There are five Gloria Steinems in "The Glorias," a new movie directed by Julie Taymor. We have Ryan Kiera Armstrong as the young Gloria, growing up in the early nineteen-forties; Lulu Wilson as a more knowing Gloria, approaching her teens; Alicia Vikander as Gloria the student, the writer, and the budding activist; Julianne Moore as Glo-

sundae for breakfast, the better to soothe her rage at being propositioned by a creepy boss, back to Armstrong's Gloria, dawdling over her vegetables at dinner and being rescued by a friendly scoop of ice cream from her father, Leo (Timothy Hutton). Occasionally, we see the different Glorias sitting on the same bus, chatting with one another: a handy

and, only after she's won, confessing that that was his last fifty dollars. He's always up on his luck.

Vikander, likewise, is a curious choice. There's something dreamy and withdrawn about her, but what made her mesmerizing as the android in "Ex Machina" (2014), thinking herself into sentient life like Pinocchio with a Ph.D., doesn't entirely square with Steinem's combative edge—or with her unblunt sense of humor, to which this movie gives worryingly short shrift. "A Bunny's Tale," Steinem's famous 1963 essay about her stint as a Playboy Bunny, remains foregroundly witty, drilling down into the unglamorous minutiae of wages, tips, foot pains, and medical inspections, and it's duly dramatized in Taymor's film, yet the onscreen Gloria seems to drift through the ordeal, fluffily tail and all, with a distant and disbelieving air.

This is a long movie, nudging two and a half hours, and it's gradually gripped by a structural panic: So many tales to tell! How to cram them in? One instructive episode follows another, with characters wheeled on to say their piece. At the March on Washington, in August, 1963, Steinem stands beside a woman who says to her, "That's Dorothy Height, up on the speakers' platform. She's head of the National Council of Negro Women. Why isn't she speaking? And where's Ella Baker, who trained all the SNCC young people?" The woman adds, "Or Fannie Lou Hamer? She got beat up in jail and then sterilized in a Mississippi hospital."

Most of this comes verbatim from "My Life on the Road," and is cause for indignation. But too much truth has an annoying habit of sounding unreal when recounted on film, and viewers know when information is being foisted upon them. The result is that what should be most uplifting, in "The Glorias," is most at risk of clunkiness. As Steinem, inquisitive to the core, puts perfectly reasonable questions to the women she meets ("I read that the Cherokee Nation was once matrilineal—is that true?"), I couldn't help being reminded of a sleuth in a B-movie mystery. ("And where were you, the disinherited stepson with a gambling addiction and access to commercial poisons, on the night of the murder?") Taymor is aware, I reckon, that her narrative is starting to sag; that's why

she suddenly pumps it up with fantasy sequences—one based on the Hindu goddess Kali, and another on the tornado from "The Wizard of Oz," tricked out with a witchy line from "Macbeth" and tinted a hellish red. Fancy stuff, but it ain't enough, and the road goes ever on. Given that Gloria Steinem is so awe-inspiring a figure, to so many people, is it any wonder that a film about her should end up being overawed?

There is a memorable image, in "Save Yourselves!" of Su (Sunita Mani) and Jack (John Reynolds) preparing to take a break. Both of them are wearing shorts and tops. On the left side of the frame, we find Su standing upright, talking on her cell phone, and extending a foot like a dancer; on the right is Jack, also holding a phone but sitting at a desk, facing a laptop and a desktop computer. Though Su and Jack are together, enclosed in the camera's gaze, they somehow look marooned in their respective spaces. And there's the rub. As they inform their professional colleagues, they will be going not just away from Brooklyn but—heaven help them—offline, for one whole week. Such is the ultimate sacrifice, if you seek to reboot your love: only disconnect.

Targeting hipsters is hardly the most challenging of sports, but that is no reason not to take a pop. It is with a mischievous delight that Alex H. Fischer and Eleanor Wilson, who wrote and directed "Save Yourselves!" zero in on the distinguishing features of the species. Jack has a nonsensical mustache and a jar of sourdough starter. When he showers with Su, she tells him to "acquaint yourself with the soaps." As

they converse, the English language drips and slips like lather. She says, "I want to be better people." He says, "I'm proud of us." At a party, they meet a friend who is working on "3-D-printed surfboards, made out of algae," and who offers them the use of a cabin upstate. He also provides a crystal from Patagonia, to be gripped in times of stress.

So our heroes head for the country, bringing the bare necessities, including microgreens and quinoa. They stop to let a chicken cross the road, without bothering to inquire into its motivation, and switch off their phones. "Bye, world!" Su cries, like a nun stepping into a convent. Here's the joke: immediately, that world begins to change. Strange trails arc through the sky, as if fireworks were being set off in daylight. Later, after Su and Jack arrive at the cabin, the night resounds with rubbery pings and twangs. Frogs, perhaps, or something with an even longer hop? Without warning, "Save Yourselves!" which was set fair as a sharp romantic comedy, changes its spots and turns into an alien-invasion flick. Hey, why not?

The aliens in question are not housed in gigantic tripods or armed with slaver fangs. Rather, they resemble a cross between a sea urchin and a scatter cushion. Su and Jack refer to them as poufs. They emit either a cute chirrup or, when provoked, a thin red line, which lashes out and sticks to whatever's in the way, such as a wall or the inconvenient head of a human. (Su has to chop through one of the lines, and it's as if she were cutting the umbilical cord of a devil.) The only person who might bond with the poufs is Spider-Man, thanks to his equally adhe-

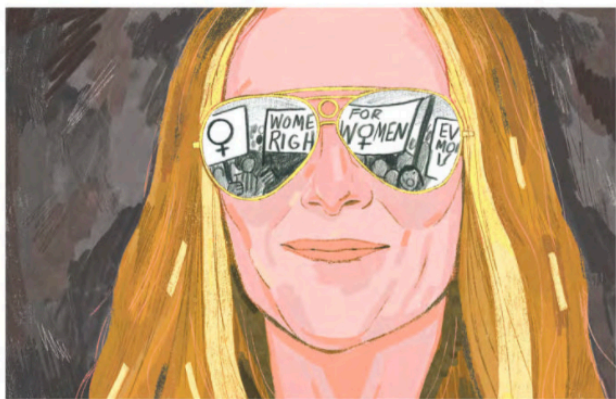
sive powers, but he's unavailable, and everyone else is in peril. Not that Su and Jack know, or particularly care, about anyone else—not, at least, until they acquire an unexpected plus-one.

Do not be fooled by the sci-fi trimmings of this film. Despite its light and amiable manner, it's a sort of "Deliverance" for the digital age, deriding the ability of tame souls, at a supposedly advanced stage of civilization, to cope with the unknown. Listen to Jack, as he ponders the need to fight: "I think there's more weaponry stuff in the basement." As for food, "I've been wanting to YouTube 'How to make a trap to catch a rabbit' so bad," he says. Such is the ascent of man: the competent hunter-gatherer has become a slave to Firefox.

Like an old "Thin Man" comedy, "Save Yourselves!" rests on its central pairing. Reynolds is one of those tall actors, like John Cleese or Jeff Goldblum, whose height is intrinsically funny; regular-sized experiences just don't fit such folk, and they constantly seem to duck and tilt, as if to squeeze through invisible doors. Mani, as Su, is less gawky, and much better at driving with a stick shift, yet her wide-eyed stare shows that she, too, exists in a state of sweet perplexity. "I'm afraid of our lives getting stagnant," she says. Well, no fear of that now. You have to say this for Su and Jack: they may be completely useless, but they're also harmless and charmingly well matched. If they were to be abducted by the poufs and sucked into unfathomable space, it couldn't happen to a nicer couple. ♦

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In Julie Taymor's film, four actresses play Gloria Steinem, at different ages.

ria in full bloom, a co-founder of *Ms.* magazine, alternately hailed and patronized for her devotion to the feminist movement; and, last of all, Steinem as herself, cheerfully addressing the crowd at the Women's March on Washington, in 2017—Gloria in excelsis, amid a firmament of pink hats.

As Taymor demonstrated in "Frida" (2002), her film about Frida Kahlo, she treats the bio-pic as the most accommodating of forms, and the new film, which she co-wrote with Sarah Ruhl, is no less quixotic. It doesn't trudge in one direction, from the heroine's childhood onward; instead, it mocks the clock, ticking to and fro among the various Glorias. Thus, we cut straight from Vikander's Gloria, ordering a hot-fudge

conceit, if you've ever wished to quiz your older self on things to come, or to scold the younger you for being a klutz.

The film arises from Steinem's 2015 memoir, "My Life on the Road," in which she admits to a constitutional restlessness, bred by an itinerant childhood. Her father—happy to be known by his business moniker, "Steinemite!"—was a Micawber of the Midwest. He shipped himself and, as often as not, his family from place to place, buying odds and ends and selling them as antiques. He vaults off the page, already halfway to a movie, and Hutton, usually a reticent performer, grabs his chance, expanding into a florid and unfamiliar buoyancy. Watch Leo giving Gloria cash to play the slots in Las Vegas

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