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## REEL WORLD



Ad Astra

### Mysteries of the universe and the human condition in two new films

**J**ames Gray's *Ad Astra* is a spectacular sci-fi adventure wrapped around a sketchy but serious-minded mixture of psychological drama and cosmic allegory. That mixture is sometimes rather labored, but the overall result is fascinating and vivid in ways that are never merely generic.

by  
**Juan-Carlos Selznick**



**Ad Astra**  
Starring Brad Pitt and Tommy Lee Jones.  
Directed by James Gray. Cinemark 14 and Feather River Cinema.  
Rated PG-13.



**Luce**  
Opens Sept. 27.  
Pageant Theatre.  
Rated R.

in keeping with the film's sidelong mysticism. Pitt's character learns a thing or two from those ghostly savants, and also from the small crowd of semi-robotic colleagues with whom he is involved.

The father-son encounter in the allegorical climax seems contrived, but the gravity of Jones and Pitt, as

well as the authority of the physical action, give it some heft all the same. And Pitt is excellent throughout as a dedicatedly robotic hero and human being who seems to find himself by losing his way.

**In *Luce*, "mixed signals" lead to increasingly perilous misunderstandings, even among well-meaning people who believe they're acting with the best of intentions.**

The key players, in this case, a school teacher/activist (Octavia Spencer); the orphaned teenage African refugee called Luce (Kelvin Harrison Jr.), who is the school's star pupil; and the childless suburban couple (Naomi Watts and Tim Roth) who have adopted him. The crisis of misunderstandings comes when the teacher finds what she takes to be evidence of violent and destructive tendencies in the young man.

Adapted by director Julius Onah and writer J. C. Lee from a play by the latter, *Luce* is a sharply written roundelay in which the characters take action on personal impressions that are mistaken or incomplete. The film lets us see the nuances of such things, moral and otherwise, with all four of the chief characters, each of whom also makes early impressions on us viewers that we're obliged to reconsider later on.

Harrison Jr. is especially fine as the mercurial Luce. Andrea Bang, Norbert Leo Butz, Marsha Stephanie Blake, and actor/rapper Astro all make apt contributions in secondary roles. □



Poor



Fair



Good



Very Good



Excellent