Cultural Daily

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Intimate Streams: Nomadland, Pieces of a Woman, Supernova

David Sheward · Saturday, March 6th, 2021

The COVID pandemic has not only shut down the American theater but it has also transformed the movie business—perhaps permanently. With movie theaters largely shuttered, viewership has shifted to home couches and is only now beginning to move back to the cineplexes. As a result, large-scale comic-book epics (or "teenage boy" pictures) have been postponed until the cinemas reopen and relationship-based flicks (or "adult women" pictures) have come to the fore through streaming services like Netflix (*Pieces of a Woman*), Amazon (*Supernova*) and Hulu (*Nomadland*). Also this year's bizarre awards season has been skewed towards female-driven vehicles.



Frances McDormand in *Nomadland*.
Credit: Searchlight Pictures

Thus, *Nomadland* (Hulu), an intimate, indie-house-feeling portrait of itinerant workers based on Jessica Bruder's non-fiction book, is in the running not only for Frances McDormand's sensitive lead performance, but also for the top Best Picture Oscar and won that award at the Golden Globes. Helmer Chloe Zhao, who also wrote the screenplay and edited the film, is poised to become the first Asian-American woman to be Oscar nominated for Best Director, having won the GG.

McDormand is luminous as Fern, a widow who travels across the Southwest in an RV after her job and entire hometown vanish due to the collapsing economy. She scrapes by in a series of temp jobs and forges brief but deep connections with a community of fellow nomads. Financially unable to retire, Fern finds joy and struggle in a gypsy existence. Zhao's screenplay offers fragments of Fern's backstory, but McDormand fills in volumes of subtext with her eloquent features, brought into high relief with sensitive close-ups by Zhao. The opening shots are the most revealing. As

Fern goes through the debris of a lifetime while examining the contents of her storage unit, McDormand endows each article of clothing and memento with a personal history. You can tell that a shirt belonged to her late husband from the way she clings to it and how it makes her face crumple. She is in almost every shot of the movie and guides us through Fern's interior and exterior road trip.



Frances McDormand in *Nomadland.*
Credit: Searchlight Pictures

Zhao gives us gorgeous shots of the desert Fern travels through and achieves an almost documentary quality with subtle non-theatrical supporting performances from David Straithairn as a potential love interest and from real-life figures from the book including RV lifestyle guru Bob Wells, and nomads Swankie and Linda May, non-actors playing versions of themselves.

Pieces of a Woman (Netflix) is another female-prospective project told in bits and pieces. Like McDormand in *Nomadland*, Vanessa Kirby relies on her actress's technique to color the voids in the screenplay. She delivers a gut-wrenching, superbly suppressed performance as Martha, a young woman whose life and marriage are shattered when a home birth goes horribly wrong. Kirby is best known as the irrepressible Princess Margaret on the first two seasons of *The Crown*. Here she goes in the opposite direction, tamping down Martha's volcano of emotions whereas she overflowed with a lava of libido and rage as the British Queen's sparkly sister. Through most of the film, Martha is silent and simmering, finally erupting in a somewhat melodramatic courtroom monologue. The screenplay by Kata Weber veers into mawkishness occasionally, banking on corny, feel-good conclusions and detouring into a tabloid territory as Martha and her partner Sean (a brutally tender Shia LaBeouf) pursue charges against their midwife (Molly Parker). But the harder, seemingly mundane moments are what make the film a devastating body blow.



Shia LaBeouf and Vanessa Kirby in *Pieces of a Woman*.
Credit: Benjamin Loeb/Netflix

For example, when Martha returns to her office job and finds a replacement at her desk or when she confronts her domineering but loving mother (a magnificent Ellen Burstyn) at a family dinner, director Kornel Mundruczo (husband of screenwriter Weber) subtly captures the small moments with a precise clarity. Muncruczo dazzles with the opening sequence, a nearly 30-minute single shot detailing Martha's harrowing delivery from first labor pains to tragic conclusion. It's an amazing half-hour of film with no break, but the real meat of the film is in its intimate moments.



Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth in *Supernova*.
Credit: The Bureau Sales.

Supernova (Amazon Prime) is another small film, shining in its short bits. Stanley Tucci and Colin Firth star as a gay couple traveling in a trailer, like *Nomadland*'s Fern, to attend a piano concert headlined by Firth's late-career musician as novelist Tucci is succumbing to early-onset dementia. Tucci's character is an astronomy buff—hence the title. His hobby afford numerous excuses for the two lay on their backs and contemplate the cosmos and wax philosophic. Director-screenwriter Harry Macqueen gets a bit treacly in the handling of the couple's resolution of their conflict over the novelist's illness, but the majority of the work is a sensitive and affecting portrait of a marriage. Like *Pieces of a Woman*, the most revealing and affecting vignettes are brief and ordinary. The

highlights are the quick shots of the two in bed, snuggling, reading, making love, or just being together. Firth and Tucci inhabit their roles so fully, we don’t need much more. As cinemas begin to open up again, large-scale, explosion fests will no doubt return to the screen, but let’s cherish these finely-wrought, tasteful gems while we can.

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