

FILM REVIEWS

Next up another review and commentary from regular contributor jami morgan.

Better than the Book? ej “jami” Morgan’s take on RFA...

Finally, I can report that I have watched the movie **Radio Free Albemuth!** I know many of you, especially the Cali contingent, participated in special screenings, including one at (or near) the 2nd U.S. PhilipKDick fest of 2012. More recently writer/Director John Alan Simon’s “final cut” (2014) played in select US cities. He also extended a generous invitation to the PKD Facebook group for a few members to join him at the Writer’s Guild screening in Beverly Hills. Hopefully some Dickheads attended.



I watched from the comfort of my home, and exchanged emails and tweets “real time” with fellow Phil fan Ted Hand while streaming RFA via Amazon.com (on my Vizio/TV device.) I watched twice one day and a third time a few days later, since Amazon offers a 7-day rental (for five bucks. Comcast wanted \$6.99 for 24-hour on-demand viewing. There are other options, but as of this writing, it’s not yet streaming on Netflix, nor is a DVD available.) I mention all this because I had no idea the movie was available for streaming until Ted posted comments about it on Fbook in mid-July. I’ve been out of the PKD loop for a few months (trying to stay focused on other projects), but as usual that giant Eye-in-the-Sky that is constantly watching, shooting pink beams, and its Adjustment Team, keeps dragging me back down the VALIS rabbit hole—in this case the RFA hole. ;-> (evil smiley, but no offense John!)

Cue applause! Yes, I applaud loudly for John Alan Simon’s awesome achievement. The back story surrounding the making of **Radio Free Albemuth**, the movie, is an equally interesting and entertaining aspect. Very Phildickian, mirroring PKD’s own struggles to get his writing recognized and circulated in the mainstream world of literature. So I hope this film continues to be “discovered” and appreciated for staying faithful to Phil’s vision. Hopefully it will, given Simon’s innovative distribution plans. He’s using social media to the max, including something called YEKRA (<http://www.yekra.com/radio-free-albemuth>) where

YOU, dear viewer, can earn some bucks by helping promote RFA. Check that out! The big-screen tour continues. Check locations and other ways of watching: www.Radio-FreeAlbemuth.com I’m fortunate that it will play in Santa Fe, New Mexico, August 29. I intend to be there, VALIS willing ;) I can honestly say I’ve enjoyed it more with each viewing. Here’s why...

The visual effects are just as many of us have imagined, particularly the pink beam. Phil’s prolific psychedelic art vision was great fun, and there are more of his mysterious, mystical 2-3-74 experiences. The effects are a notable accomplishment considering the “small budget” nature of this production. It was Simon’s choice to keep the indie-flick flavor, he says. You’ll learn more about his choices and his thinking on other aspects of

the production process in this two part interview he provided to Tessa Dick for her podcast: Here is Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzBxXIXJtk0#t=174> This link is a Youtube montage of RFA video clips over Director Simon’s audio discussion of the movie. Both parts were edited by a friend of Tessa’s known online as “VEEKJimmyjimmjams.” Here’s Part 2 with more of director Simon’s interview: http://youtu.be/tmQ7EBteVM8?list=PLbjVRkKmb9_Qb7MI2NCeisWqrV2SXPW2S

Clearly this is more of an analysis than a movie review. For one thing, as a writer, I’ve always had a disdain for critics who complain but never create. That said, there was one thing in the movie that bugged me, and I’ll address it later. As I told Ted and John, and have posted previously, my real angst with RFA has always been about the posthumous release of the novel. I’ll elaborate a bit more on that, too, along with opposing views. But first, let me share more thoughts about the movie. I’m writing my observations “clean”, not tainted by the other reviews. Then I’ll read and comment on what others said back during the early “preview daze” as well as the current buzz.

The movie trailer has always provided plenty of enticement and promise for the audio and visual quality to come. As I said, I was not disappointed. The “200 CGI shots” John mentions in the audio links really are “special” effects. Also, I loved Simon’s treatment of opening with Phil, the character, secretly writing his account—a book for future generations—about the “conspiracy.” That, and making the characters younger, really improved

the story, IMHO.

As for the actors, to invoke Teddy again, he called Shea Whigham as Philip K. Dick “a casting coup.” Agreed! Not being a fan or viewer of HBO’s *Boardwalk Empire* I did not know of Shea as Eli on that series, but many of you might. For the first few minutes I wasn’t sure I would like him as Phil. But the more I watched the more I could see how perfect he was as a younger, slimmer Phil. We all have mental images of those who populate the stories we read. I certainly had a different idea of Nicholas Brady, who made such an impact on me that I named the protagonist in my novel after him (Niki Perceval whose surname speaks for itself ;)) Not that I thought Nick was a fool, but as Phil’s alter ego they were both on a never-ending Grail quest. So, it took me awhile to warm up to this younger, yuppie-like couple of Nick (Jonathan Scarfe) and Rachel (Katheryn Winnick, of the History Channel’s *Vikings* series.) Writer/Director Simon also explains in one of the interview links why he changed the group dynamic so that these three become a trio of hip friends.



Alanis Morissette’s role in the film always intrigued me. Who knew she could act? I forgot that she played God in *Dogma*. Here she is Sylvia Sadassa. I can’t say more, without revealing too much, but you can hear Simon explain how he recruited Alanis and the other actors. Morissette does play and sing too, at least in one atmospheric scene. Music is important to this movie and to Simon. There should be a soundtrack available, but it’s not the RFA MP3 by Stu Hamm that my Amazon search turned up. Simon points out that one is from 1988, and unrelated to his movie. This music is by Robyn Hitchcock, with scoring by Ralph Grierson.

I was definitely suspending my disbelief (that willing suspension all writers hope for), mesmerized by the fab effects of Phil, I mean Nick Brady, wandering around in a psychedelic sixties scene—very much like the temple dreams of my Niki in **A Kindred Spirit**—when someone said VAY-lis. I was slammed back to reality.

John and I have since emailed about this, but I felt distracted every time one of the characters referred to the

ancient satellite as VAY-lis, rather than the soft “a” sound of VAL (like Kilmer or a girl’s nickname for Valerie.) “It was an artistic decision,” Simon says (he must be soooo tired of that phrase), “The book takes its inspiration from James Joyce and with his love of puns, how is ‘veil us’ not the more interesting way to pronounce an acronym for an entity that steeps mankind in mystery and uncertainty—a central tenet of gnostic philosophy. In fact the word ‘veil’ comes up many times in the Exegesis and PKD letters.” But John, VALIS isn’t trying to “veil us” its purpose was to enlighten us, right? And the first word of the acronym, “vast”, implies the soft “a” sound. Apparently other Phil fans weren’t bothered, or at least didn’t voice this issue earlier while Simon was still editing the film. For the record, Phil did pronounce VALIS with the

soft “a” (you can hear him on tape or Youtube clips.) All the fans I’ve conversed with use the “vast” sound, and just recently I listened to the audio version of RFA again and the narrator says VAL-is. Just sayin’. So once I got past that peccadillo, and accustomed to the actors, I decided I like the movie better than the book.

What? I hear some Dickheads gasping in horror, a few choking. I’m half kidding, but half serious. After all, I am the one with all the angst about publishing the RFA manuscript “as is” or “as was”, meaning the state it was in when Phil handed it off to Tim Powers “for safe keeping.” Tessa reconfirmed to us recently that after the famous home “break-in”, Phil handed off a few unpublished works to Powers to protect and preserve. Phil, however, went on to write VALIS in 1977-78, which he claimed

worked better with key elements of RFA incorporated as a movie called “VALIS” within his novel. Thus, the title for the revised novel became VALIS.

That’s not just me talking—Mark Hurst, the Bantam editor (and “staunch Phil Dick advocate” according to PKD biographer Lawrence Sutin, pgs. 241 and 244, in his DI bio) asked for revisions of the then work-in-progress called Valisystem A. Instead, Phil opted for an entirely new approach “that would grapple with 2-3-74 more completely.” Paul Williams writes the same thing in the back matter of **Only Apparently Real**. But, hashing this again in 2014 is a moot point because as time passes and memories fade,

“I like the movie better than the book”

or become embellished for some, we cannot know for sure what Phil intended.

I was going to cite one of the “Claudia” letters from 1975 (from his **Exegesis**), but any Dickhead worth one’s salt knows that even Phil—especially Phil—used to tell a different version of reality to each friend or lover. Even his thoughts and journal writing changed daily. So, we will never really know if Phil wanted RFA published as he left it. Money probably would have been a huge deciding factor had he received an offer in his lifetime. And that’s really the only point that should be clarified for posterity: RFA was not published in Philip K. Dick’s lifetime. It was not his final novel, as some cite in reviews. The VALIS “trilogy” is **VALIS**, **Divine Invasion**, and Phil’s final novel **The Transmigration of Timothy Archer** (his edits and manuscript work of TToTA completed May, 1981, and published just after Phil’s death in 1982.) **RFA** was published posthumously in 1985 by Arbor House. That much is factual.



It seems truly prophetic for **Radio Free Albemuth** to emerge as a movie thirty years later. If the novel **VALIS** ever becomes a movie, or one of these new streaming serials (as we’re hearing about **The Man in the High Castle**), then all we can hope for is that Mother Goose’s mysterious manifestations will be as artistically stylized on the screen as Simon has done for these effects, and that “Eric Lampton” and Brent Mini’s “Synchronicity Music” will be as well rendered as RFA’s riffs. (Wouldn’t it be a hoot to have Eric Clapton actually show up?) After all, [“Mother Goose is Eric Lampton,” Kevin said. “He wrote the screenplay for **VALIS** and he stars in it.”] (Direct quote in brackets from Phil speaking in **VALIS**.) Now that really is convoluted!

At this point, I did check online to see what others had posted about the movie. Half of the complaining movie critics don’t realize that the “convoluted” or “difficult” aspects of the plot were from the novel. Phil’s stuff is mind-boggling, just the way we like it, but for many viewers they just won’t get that. Take this comment on Amazon that represents a generic movie goer, rather than a Phil fan: “**Radio Free Albemuth** tries to creatively and intellectually tackle too many scientific, pseudo-scientific, and spiritual theories and ideas, from the profound weight of which, it collapses upon itself like a bloated, gaseous neutron star.”

BAH! I say. That is exactly what people who read early drafts of my novel said; that I was tackling too many topics, trying to incorporate too many diverse concepts and

theories. But, I was playing off **VALIS** and doing exactly what Phil did— tackling everything—but, it’s also why we love his writing and continue to re-read it fifty years later, when other authors are long forgotten! That is why a screen writer, now director, like John Alan Simon stayed true to Phil’s vision, even if it meant sacrificing the simplistic “summer block buster” and the big bucks that could have come with it.

So, Teddy is right. We owe allegiance to Simon. He didn’t sell out. He made the movie Phil fans have always said they want, so get out there and support this creative, authentic effort and of course, “**Join the Conspiracy!**”

Oh, one last important tidbit from John Simon. Early in his comments for Tessa’s podcast, he says RFA chose him. I know *exactly* what he means. I always said I had no intention of writing a novel, but something about **VALIS** affected me so deeply, that I jumped up in the middle of the night claiming I must write my own version of it! Such audacity and it only took fourteen years ;) I kept hearing in my head, “the story must be told.” Simon expresses the same sentiment. He *had* to write, produce and direct this movie. Glad you did, John!

Jami posted shorter reviews of “RFA for IMDB and Amazon.com. Here are the links: IMDB: <http://imdb.com/title/tt1129396/reviews-23> and a short one on Amazon (that Tessa and Ted Hand have commented on) <http://www.amazon.com/review/R19KTRVUDXBYSK> .

She also entered a FAQ on IMDB about the novel itself at: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1129396/faq?ref_=tt_faq_1#2.1.1

As for your humble editor here, I still haven’t seen the movie. I’m hoping it will appear soon a local theater here in the city. I like my movies on the large screen and a couple of film festivals are coming around soon. But if that doesn’t happen I’ll catch it on disk. Netflix claims it will be available through them in October.

From Albuquerque, Otaku contributor ej “jami” Morgan is the author of the novel **A Kindred Spirit** which fictionalizes PKD’s continuing quest— in the afterlife—for what’s really real. You can find jami’s books and blog at:

www.AKSbook.com .

