

## Photo Credits:

**1. (Left to right) Jamie Dornan (as Anthony) and Emily Blunt (as Rosemary) star as reluctant lovers in “Wild Mountain Thyme.” Photo courtesy of Bleeker Street Pictures.**

**2. Frances McDormand (left) as Fern, chats with Chloé Zhao, her director in “Nomadland.” Photo courtesy of Searchlight Pictures.**

At the Movies

This Month: Quiet Dignity on the Plains,  
an Irish Romance, and a Musical Romp

By Mike Canning

## Nomadland

In recent years, there has been a burst of earnest documentaries telling stories, usually bleak, about the demise of the American working class, our increasing inequality, and the marginalization of tens of millions of our citizens from mainstream life. Much of these stories of economic woe have appeared on public television or cable news outlets like CNN with their creators trying to touch the hearts of viewers. Sub-themes of this genre include steady loss of American jobs to overseas competition and the disasters of the opioid epidemic. Into this grim landscape comes a new film that doesn't so much lament the lower working class's fate as look at how it can survive with modest dignity (*The film, now streaming, runs 108 minutes and is rated “R”*).

The best thing about “Nomadland” is that it treats its marginal characters not as emblems of scorn or pity but as resilient and resourceful figures in undistinguished landscapes, no longer attached to family but reliant on friends of the road and other “van people” who drift in and out of an itinerant existence. These survivors make do, look out for each other, don't complain, and, though poor, find work where they can and comradeship when they can.

This stoic stance is personified by Fern (Frances McDormand), whom we see, not as a complainer or whiner, but as a relatively sunny woman accepting of the treasures she acquires on the road. When we see her at her seasonal job at an Amazon fulfillment station, she is not depicted as a put-upon, exploited drudge but as a sturdy, flexible worker comfortable with her lot and connected to her co-workers. Having recently lost her husband (they both worked at a United Gypsum plant that closed down) Fern needs cash for the next phase of her life and satisfies the need at the shipping center.

For true comradeship, she connects with a fellow worker, Bob (Bob Wells) who invites her to a stay out the winter at an RV park in Arizona, where she makes friends with other fellow van campers and learns survival skills from them, especially a woman

named Swankie. Fern becomes a camp host at the RV park, where she meets David (David Strathairn) and the two take jobs at a local restaurant to make do. Later Fern comes to stay with David and his family, but she declines to stay with them permanently. She needs the road.

At the end of the film Fern takes on her seasonal Amazon job and ultimately returns to the Arizona commune. There she learns that Swankie has died, but reconnects with Bob and the two recount the stories of their lives. In a delicate soliloquy, he notes the fact that goodbyes are not final in the nomad community, as they always promise to “see you down the road.”

As Fern, McDormand is a perfect fit for the role, a humble but good-spirited soul who takes life as it comes and makes the best of her circumstances. Never sour or antagonistic, she is a natural—no vanity, but rather pedestrian and practical in her person, and accepting of others. She has bright open eyes and can emit a gentle smile. Her lack of airs and taciturn qualities might remind you of her role in “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri” (2017). Except here her persona is mild, not enraged.

McDormand is nicely seconded by Strathairn as David, just as measured and accepting, but still harkening back to a family he still cherishes. Other players, like Bob and Swankie are, in fact, real van people recruited by direct-writer Chloé Zhao to stand in for the spirit and wisdom of benign vagabonds who still roam our American West, content to live in vans and watch the sunsets.

Chinese-American Zhao, close observer of the hard-scrabble West, last made “The Rider” (2017), a well-crafted tale of other itinerants, rodeo cowboys, living in similar broad landscapes of our cow country. As she did with “The Rider,” she cast real denizens of our West to give greater authenticity to these characters. “Nomadland” could be seen as a kind of sequel, being a precise and thoughtful investigation of a community the movies have not investigated before.

Watch for it to be called at awards time.

### **(Feel-good) Short Takes**

To quote the musical “Annie,” “Nomadland” shows us a rural “hard-knock life,” but portrays it in amiable and redemptive ways, offering positive vibes even in troubled times. The following are mini-reviews of other end-of-year films that prove up-lifting instead of downtrodden, touches of humor and romance after horrid 2020.

**Wild Mountain Thyme** -- A touching Irish romance that offers lovely roles for its long unrequited lovers, Rosemary Muldoon (Emily Blunt) and Anthony Reilly (Jamie Dornan). Life-long neighbors and friends since childhood, the two children of contiguous farms in beautiful County Mayo have long had a rough-and-tumble relationship and grown up like testy siblings. Trouble is, Rosemary has always had a yen for Anthony which he is too shy or reserved to acknowledge. When, after Anthony’s crotchety father Tony (Christopher Walken) decides to bequeath his spread to a smug American cousin Adam Kelly (Jon Hamm) instead of to Anthony, their joint futures are threatened. This is

too much for Rosemary, who finally presses Anthony to commit to their land together-- and to each other. But Anthony has a long-held secret he feels he must hide from Rosemary who makes her final move (*this film is rated PG-13* and runs "PG-13" and runs 102 minutes).

Written and directed by American playwright John Patrick Shanley ("Moonstruck") from his play, "Thyme" is sentimental but satisfying, and, though the chemistry between the leads takes some time to kindle, the spark glows in the last act. Adding a lovely grace note to the proceedings is the use of the title Scottish ballad, "Wild Mountain Thyme," sung winningly first as a solo by Blunt, and later reprised at the film's sweet conclusion.

**The Prom** -- A silly, but jaunty, "high-school musical" where a group of Broadway has-beens, let down after a musical flop in Manhattan, launch their own musical in small-town Indiana to revive the spirits of a young gay girl, Emma (Jo Ellen Pellman). Emma was denied a prom experience because her scheduled date was her lesbian girlfriend, banned from the event by the school's PTA president prudish Mrs. Greene (Kerry Washington). *The film, now streaming, lasts 130 minutes and is rated "PG-13."*

Stars Meryl Streep, James Corden, and Nicole Kidman are over the top and overdressed, but are entertaining in the most spangled, gushing way. There are hints of the TV musical series "Glee" (which this film's director Ryan Murphy, brought to television) and also suggestions of "Mama Mia," because of the two films utterly implausible plots. A crucial difference, however, is their respective music tracks. "The Prom's" soundtrack, though energetic, simply can't match the bounce and catchiness of the ABBA numbers. Newcomer Ms. Pellman (who is gay) proves the best performer in the film as a bright, sympathetic girl who just wants to enjoy her youthful rite-of-passage.

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