

2020 REALNESS

***Stress Positions* is so much more than a COVID comedy**

It's 2020 (shivers) and TerryGoon is trying and often failing to keep a strict quarantine in his ex-boyfriend's brownstone in New York City while taking care of his 19-year old nephew, a model from Morocco named Bahlul left immobile after an electric scooter accident. A sign of the times.

When Terry isn't scrubbing down his door handles, he's trying to keep his posse of gay friends from meeting his model nephew. He also fails at that.

Stress Positions is not a movie about COVID. In fact, the pandemic is merely a backdrop that creates some hilarious situations.

Between begrudgingly banging pots and pans out apartment windows, awkward DoorDash encounters and frantically putting masks on, *Stress Positions* is a 2020 postcard that nobody really asked for or even wanted but I liked it. A lot.

Starring as Terry's friend Karla — and writing the film — is the irreverent comedian and co-host of the podcast *NYMPHOWARS*, Theda Hammel. If you've listened to *NYMPHOWARS*, it's hard to imagine that Hammel is even playing a character, she's just her outrageously funny self.

Terry, played by *Search Party* star John Early, is neurotic, annoying and the perfect foil to counteract Hammel. Qaher Harhash, a Palestinian model makes his acting debut as Bahlul, the shy model whose journey of self and sexuality discovery adds a level of depth to the film making it more than a poke at the pandemic. Harhash's performance is subtle but effective at peering into the lens of a curious newcomer who is greeted with open arms by his uncle's queer community.

The writing, though, is what grabs me in *Stress Positions*. Hammel is witty, original and above all true to the queer community she's writing about. You can stream *Stress Positions* on Amazon Prime, YouTube, Apple TV, Fandango at Home and Google Play Movies and TV. — *Emerson Brady*



MURDER IN BLACK AND WHITE

The latest, creepy, The Talented Mr. Ripley

Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* has been made into a movie twice, the more recent attempt, in 1999, featuring Matt Damon in the title role. Watchable as they both are, neither film adaptation comes as close to capturing Highsmith's dark, unsettling story of a young conman who turns to casual murder as does the new Netflix series ***Ripley***, an eight-parter that debuted April 4.

First off, Andrew Scott is deliciously creepy as Ripley, so much so my wife almost couldn't watch it after a couple episodes (though she couldn't look away, either). What keeps even the easily unnerved from bailing is that cinematographer Robert Elswit shot the entire series in black and white so luscious that every scene looks like an art masterpiece. The sheer photographic beauty traps you in the show's unrelenting, claustrophobic suspense. "I know it is great and gorgeous, but the story makes me so unnerved I cannot watch it," *New York Magazine* senior art critic Jerry Saltz posted on Instagram. "Watched the first episode jumping out of my skin — yelling at the TV."

Set largely in Rome, this *Ripley* sticks close to Highsmith's story while alluding to the deep shadows of film noir classics of the 1950s and '60s. It adds, as a character, Baroque painter Caravaggio, a murderer himself, who pretty much invented that noir look with his dramatically lit scenes of the dark side of Catholic iconography and the underbelly of Roman nightlife. Also added: a scene-stealing Maine Coon house cat named Lucio, as in Lucifer, who makes repeat appearances at key moments in the drama. A must-see. — *Bob Keefer*

THE *FALLOUT* ...

of a good video game adaptation on Amazon

Crawling out through the fallout of terrible video game adaptations, Amazon Prime Studio's ***Fallout*** TV series is a perfect representation of the perennial video game series from 1997.

I honestly did not think they could pull it off. I'd been so disappointed by some of my favorite franchises being turned into movies and TV shows before — namely Paramount Plus' *Halo* series.

Flash! Bam! Alakazam — did this show surprise me, just falling out of an orange-colored sky.

It's a show that just gets it.

Fallout's classic tone — bleakly depressing and yet raucously funny, all the while delivering iconoclastic satire on American-branded consumerism and nationalism — is done perfectly. It understands the series' main ethos, too. The line "Everyone wants to save the world. They just disagree on how," delivered by Aaron Moten's character, Maximus, captures what the series has been trying to say since the '90s.

Taking 3D assets straight from the games, this series makes it feel like I'm playing a brand new *Fallout* game from our god Todd Howard. It doesn't just look like it, it feels like it, too. Playing classic songs like "So Doggone Lonesome" by Johnny Cash, "It's a Man" by Benny Hutton and "Orange Colored Sky" by Nat King Cole make me feel like I'm exploring the bombed-out wasteland of Los Angeles.

And personally, I couldn't have been happier watching the end of the world on Amazon Prime. — *Bentley Freeman*

