

Movie Review: "Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show - 30 Days and 30 Nights, Hollywood to the Heartland"

by Lee Grant

"Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show - 30 Days and 30 Nights, Hollywood to the Heartland" is a surprisingly moving, often hilarious account of five men on the road - four talented comedians and a movie star.

'VINCE VAUGHN'S WILD WEST COMEDY SHOW' - Justin Long and Vince Vaughn lead an ensemble cast of stand-up performers in 'Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show -- 30 Days and 30 Nights, Hollywood to the Heartland.' CNS Photo courtesy of Picturehouse. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Onstage and off, they weave stories and life insights night-after-night to audiences from San Diego to Lubbock to Louisville.

It's an intimate look into the heart of ambition and struggle and the prodigious challenge of making people laugh. Few films have captured the sensibilities of the road for comedians - the nerves, the flop sweats, the

exhilaration of "the kill" when audiences roar at your work. Jerry Seinfeld's "Comedian" (2002) and the roster of Richard Pryor concert films, especially "Live on the Sunset Strip" (1982), have that visceral texture.

Then, there's the matter of stardom, why people act the way they do in the presence of a regular guy from Chicago like Vaughn. He's a friendly, older brother-type, a pal with whom you'd like to play ball, maybe dodgeball. But when the tour stops in Tucson, the sorority girls at the University of Arizona have other ideas.

What the comics - Ahmed Ahmed, John Caparulo, Bret Ernst and Sebastian Maniscalco - have in common are ways of humorously relating their roots, whether Egypt for Ahmed or New Jersey for Ernst, with not just punch lines but punches to the gut.

Ahmed utilizes in the act his mistaken profiling arrest in Las Vegas and life "as an Arab in America in the post-9/11 world" digging right at the wariness of the audience: "You guys have to get to an airport two hours beforehand; it takes me six weeks."

Along the way, the movie visits the comics' hometowns and families. Ernst's New Jersey mom, blessed with a raucous, contagious laugh, is almost as funny as her son, joining in when the loving conversation turns to the comedian's gay older brother. "Our goals were different," said Ernst. "Mine was for the Cowboys to win the Super Bowl; his was for Susan Lucci to win an Emmy."

For the month's journey, the men shared a bus, the close living quarters a challenge. They'd speak about each other to the camera. Ernst on Caparulo: "He's decidedly belligerent, like a machine gun." In the end, there was a bonding, the value seeping in of this once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

Vaughn, the "Wedding Crashers" star who took a serious career misstep with the recent "Fred Claus," is a regular at L.A.'s Comedy Store. He, Ahmed and Peter Billingsley, the film's executive producer, acted together in a 1990 "CBS Schoolbreak Special" about the evils of steroids. Billingsley, who became famous as little Ralphie in 1983's "A Christmas Story," and Vaughn have remained best friends.

Director Ari Sandel, who won the best live action short film Oscar last year for "West Bank Story," a musical about competing Israeli and Palestinian falafel stands, has found a delicate middle ground in "Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show."

He has the benefit of onstage performers with superb material and the graceful eye to capture camaraderie and pathos. There's Maniscalco's piece on the chaotic nature of the Ross Dress for Less stores, perhaps the picture's funniest bit. "It's like downtown Beirut," he observes. "Everything's on the floor. The irregular clothing, a 31-inch waist, an 88-inch-long leg."

Meanwhile, when the entire crew visits the victims of Hurricane Katrina who'd been evacuated to Oak Mountain State Park in Alabama, and Vaughn puts his arms around folks who may have never seen a celebrity up close before, it's a magical moment of human connection.

At the University of Texas El Paso, Caparulo, in particular, gets a booming ovation, stopped often by what the comics call "applause breaks." Observed Vaughn, in awe, "That 15 minutes of affection, that's what they live for."

"Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show - 30 Days and 30 Nights, Hollywood to the Heartland" delivers 90 minutes of that.

Directed by Ari Sandel. Cast includes: Vince Vaughn, Ahmed Ahmed, Peter Billingsley, John Caparulo, Bret Ernst, Keir O'Donnell, Justin Long and Sebastian Maniscalco; Rated R; 3 1/2 stars; 100 minutes.

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