

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS"

This is a film about a father who runs. He runs from a past, consisting of a fatherless childhood, a failing marriage and poor business choices. He runs toward a future, consisting of the cloudy hope of a successful new career, self-respect and possible "happyness." Above all, he runs with his child, the love of his life. And even when his son isn't physically with him, literally running with Dad, the father's run continues. But it's more than just a mere run -- it's an all-out pursuit.

Inspired by the true story of Chris Gardner's rise from rags to riches, Gardner states that the title came about when a daycare facility he was considering didn't pass muster because it misspelled "happiness" in its name. In the movie, Will Smith's Gardner utilizes the misspelled word scrawled on a wall as an opportunity to educate his five-year-old son on the definition and proper spelling. When his child points out another word on the wall, this one of the four-letter variety, Gardner stumbles as he tries to give an age-appropriate explanation. And so it goes with this film: time and again, Director Muccino gives us moments of simplicity, never hitting us over the head with overblown sentimentality that, in lesser hands, could have turned this movie into weepy melodrama.

The story: In 1981, struggling salesman Chris Gardner invests his dreams and money in a bone density machine that turns out to be more bust than boon. Bumping into a clearly successful man on the street, Gardner asks him what he does. "Stockbroker," the man replies. Once Gardner discovers that he can apply for a Dean Witter stockbroker internship program without having a college degree, he hounds the program's administrator as only a good salesman can. It's not until Gardner is accepted that he realizes that the six-month internship program won't pay him a penny, and even if he makes it through, there's a high probability that he won't be offered a job. The film takes us through the six months of Gardner's struggle as an evicted single dad, studying in shelters by night, charming new investors by day, all the while hiding his desperate financial straits from Dean Witter.

The extreme juxtaposition of the wealthy with the homeless is woven into the fabric of this film. A sparkling new blue convertible crowded with laughing college kids cruises by a shelter crowded with people begging to get a bed for the night. Director Muccino gives us a lingering, long shot of a wealthy executive mounting the rose-bordered steps to his mansion, then jumpcuts to Gardner crammed into his temporary hovel. The painful

irony of Gardner vying to manage people's bloated pension accounts, while having no roof over his own head, is more than just a little disturbing. It's the American dream running smack dab into the American nightmare.

Will Smith's performance, honest, subdued, mingling gentle humor with raw sorrow, is stunning. In reviewing his earlier films, it seems that only in "The Legend of Bagger Vance" does he touch on similarly low-keyed work. A scene in the subway in which the father has to hide his own fears in order to make his child feel safe by "playing pretend" is absolutely marvelous. As for child actor Jaden Smith, the filmmakers succeed in giving us a bright, but not overly precocious little boy, who is subject to fits of temper just like any confused five-year-old. Thandie Newton turns in an aching performance as the mother who realizes she has to leave home in order to find her "happyness." The sketch of a marriage that's already six feet under, far past any forced generic mumbles of "love you, hon" is bracingly honest.

Screenwriter Conrad ratchets up the tension time and time again, so that something as simple as Gardner getting to an appointment, or jotting down a phone number, is filled with unexpected conflict. Though the audience is pulling for the charming Gardner from the start, we sweat along with him so often that our emotional investment in him grows deeper with each scene.

A small cavil: we don't get to witness Gardner's charm as the stockbroker-in-training who's at the top of his class. When he makes his sales pitches, we hear the same drivel that we would get from any telemarketer. We need to love him and pull for him all the way. The few times when he turns into an everyday car salesman seem wrong.

For a subtly directed, beautifully written and superbly acted film that examines the inner demons racing right beside us as we pursue our individual American dreams:

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: A-

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Click here to see the movie trailer for "The Pursuit of Happyness". Production Credits: "The Pursuit of Happyness" Directed by: Gabriele Muccino Screenplay by: Steve Conrad Cast: Will Smith, Jaden Smith, James Karen, Brian Howe, Thandie Newton Rated: PG-13 Running Time: 117 minutes Grade: A-

The Screen Savor: "Running for the Gold"™ by Kimberly_Gadette