

DVD Select: It's no contest â€" 'Little Miss Sunshine' is a winner

by Robert J. Hawkins

I watch the captivating "Little Miss Sunshine" (Fox, 3 1/2 stars) and I feel as though my eyeballs are inches away from the stretched-taut seams of an extremely overinflated soccer ball. This is what we call a dangerous comedy: Ready to blow up in your face at any moment, and yet, who can turn away?

"Little Miss Sunshine" is the story of a very ordinary American family - overextended, underfinanced, dysfunctional at every level and yet tethered to each other by an unseen and seemingly elastic bond.

Richard Hoover (Greg Kinnear) is a motivational speaker who flogs an extraordinarily common nine-step program to success. He's invested his life in this and is one book deal away from the big-time lecture circuit (in his own mind). Wife, Sheryl (Toni Collette) is the breadwinner, check balancer, homemaker and glue that keeps the family staggering along.

â€"LITTLE MISS SUNSHINEâ€™ - Alan Arkin, Steve Carell, Paul Dana, Abigail Breslin, Toni Collette and Greg Kinnear star in the comedy â€"Little Miss Sunshine.â€• CNS Photo courtesy of Eric Lee. Their two kids are Dwayne (Paul Dano), an angry punk-Goth who has taken a vow of silence until he is accepted into the Air Force Academy, and Olive (heartbreakingly adorable Abigail Breslin) a chubby little cherub who dreams of becoming a beauty queen. Add to the mix Richard's loopy father Edwin (Alan Arkin) and Sheryl's gay-suicidal brother Frank (Steve Carell) and you can spell "family" A-S-Y-L-U-M.

Through some quirk in the beauty pageant universe, little Olive has suddenly become eligible for a tot beauty contest in Southern California but only has days to get there from the family's New Mexico home. Richard sees this as an opportunity to put his success program to the test - if Olive can believe, she can win, blah, blah, blah.

Everybody piles into a creaky old Volkswagen microbus and heads west, including Grandpa and Frank, neither of whom can be left home alone unsupervised.

What this depressingly normal family experiences on this three-day trip is absolutely, hilariously insane by any standards. And I don't think I'm giving away anything by saying that they do NOT kill each other along the highway. In fact, by the time they get to the pageant hotel, an odd unity has enveloped them - comrades who have come through battle together. You are either on the bus, or off the bus, as Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters used to say.

The laughs could easily be at the expense of this family, especially little Olive's delusional beauty queen dreams, but they aren't. We're laughing to keep from crying; we're pulling for them to succeed; we're sharing

their tiny victories as if they were world beaters. They're just us, trying to get to the next rise with some dignity intact.

You'll fall in love with the whole Hoover family and wish that - when they point that beaten up old bus back east - they could just keep going down the highway forever. Because, you know, sooner or later they have to park it in the driveway and start life all over again.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"All the King's Men" (Sony, 3 stars) There are few tales more riveting than the rise and fall of a politician. At least they were riveting when they weren't quite so common - and when the transgressions of plummeting politicians weren't so common either. Back in the day of Louisiana political kingpin Willie Stark (a riveting Sean Penn), politicians fell from great heights. Today, they fall off the curb, face down into little puddles of greed. In 1947, author Robert Penn Warren modeled his fictional Willie Stark after a real, tragic hero of the people, Huey P. Long. Only two years after the book came out, Hollywood turned it into a classic, starring Broderick Crawford as Stark. He won one of the picture's three Oscars. Penn could do the same. This remake is supported by terrific pre-Katrina location shooting in New Orleans and a great cast that includes Anthony Hopkins, Jude Law, Patricia Clarkson, Kate Winslet, James Gandolfini and Mark Ruffalo. Steamy as a Louisiana swamp. I say, rent them both and read the novel.

"My Super Ex-Girlfriend" (Fox, 2 stars) When rebounding single guy Matt Saunders (Luke Wilson) finally finds the perfect woman, he hits the jackpot ... maybe that should be crackpot. The demure, bookish babe - as bland as her name, Jenny Johnson (Uma Thurman) - runs an art gallery by day but is a bonifide superhero when duty calls. She's G-Girl, with all the powers of Superman and a chic wardrobe to boot. Matt has also hit the psycho girlfriend trifecta: needy, jealous and controlling, as his unctuous sidekick pal Vaughn Haige (a scene-stealing Rainn Wilson, from "The Office") points out. Breaking up with a superhero turns into a life-threatening situation, forcing Matt to align with G-Girl's archfoe and former childhood sweetheart Dr. Bedlam, also known as Barry (Eddie Izzard reaching over the top, almost). There's also Matt's office "buddy" Hannah (Anna Faris) and his boss Carla Dunkirk (Wanda Sykes, playing once again, Wanda Sykes). So much potential here. For an Ivan Reitman film, this one is pretty tame - except for the scene in which G-Girl hurls a live shark at Matt, who's in the high-rise bedroom of Hannah. Now that's acting. So, it's a diversionary film on a slow night.

"Beauty Academy of Kabul" (Documentary, 2 1/2 stars) When it comes time to send aid to a war-torn nation, beauticians and hairdressers are not at the top of anyone's list. That didn't stop a group of professional aestheticians from opening a front in the city of Kabul and inviting Afghan women in to learn the fine art of beauty, Western style. After watching this documentary, you, too, will begin to think that maybe there is more to reviving a nation than big trucks, power plants and new highways. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, they declared open warfare on their own women. For a time, a little lipstick could be fatal. Learning how to do a makeover is not only a little bit subversive, it is a step toward self-esteem. It is also a livelihood that about 30 women are now able to practice. On the downside, you wish the Western beauticians (one in particular) had left their Ugly American attitudes back in the states.

"Brooklyn Lobster" (Hart Sharp, 2 1/2 stars) As his father did before him, crusty and intransigent Frank Giorgio (Danny Aiello) runs the family's Brooklyn business - it's lobsters, not mobsters. Giorgio Lobster Farm is under siege. His bank failed, his mortgage defaulted to the FDIC and the feds are auctioning off the property, which includes a half-built restaurant adjacent to the wholesale crustacean business. Frank's marriage is under siege, too. His wife of 25-plus years, Maureen (a nicely subdued Jane Curtin), hasn't said "divorce," but she's moving into her own place and hasn't invited Frank. Son Michael (Daniel Sauli) comes home from Seattle for the holidays and, like everyone else, his efforts to help his obstinate father are thwarted. Frank's a tough old guy, but he still has a lesson or two ahead. It's a nice story full of small victories and defeats as wounded parties keep moving forward and Frank's definition of "family" undergoes heartwarming changes.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"American Pie Presents the Naked Mile" (Universal, 1 star) Run, Eugene Levy, run! As far away from this flaccid franchise as you can ... M. Night Shyamalan's quirky swimming pool fable "Lady in the Water" (Warner, 2 stars) starring Paul Giamatti ... The unwanted remake of a 1974 classic of terror, "The Wicker Man" (Warner, 1 1/2 stars) starring Nicolas Cage ... Spike Lee's powerful HBO documentary of Katrina's New Orleans orphans "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts" (HBO, 3 stars) ... Richard Linklater's interpretation of sci-fi author Philip K. Dick's futuristic paranoia-fest, in motion-capture animation, "A Scanner Darkly" (Warner, 2 1/2 stars) ... In Philadelphia's other Rocky tale, "Invincible" (Buena Vista, 3 stars), Mark Wahlberg is the die-hard Eagles fan who shows up for football tryouts and makes the team.

FROM THE VAULTS

"O. Henry's Full House" (Fox, 1952) Fittingly, there are five short films packaged here, all from one of America's greatest short-story writers, O. Henry, and tied together with a snippet of narration from another great writer, John Steinbeck. In "The Cop and the Anthem" Charles Laughton is a down-and-out wastrel just trying to get arrested for the winter. (That's Marilyn Monroe he tries to proposition, in front of one cop.) In "Clarion Call," Dale Robertson is a good cop unable to arrest a crazed Richard Widmark because of a long-unpaid debt. In the "Last Leaf," an ailing Anne Baxter clings to life only as long as the last leaf clings to the vine across the alley. In "The Ransom of Red Chief," Fred Allen and Oscar Levant kidnap the prototype for Dennis the Menace and pay dearly for it. And finally, in "The Gift of the Magi" Jeanne Crain and Farley Granger make bold sacrifices to buy each other Christmas presents. Great directors stepped in to create these little masterpieces, including Henry Hathaway and Howard Hawks. Buy it for the holidays, but do yourself a favor and read the original O. Henry stories.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season five of "Hogan's Heroes" (Paramount, five discs, 26 episodes). Season six of "Married ... With

Children" (Sony, three discs, 26 episodes). Season one of "Driving Force" (A&E Home Video, two discs, 10 episodes). The ninth season of "The Simpsons" (Fox, four discs, 25 episodes).

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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