

Movie Review: Adventures in 'Adventureland'

by Jane Clifford

James Brennan, graduating from college, is so ready for that getaway to Europe with his buddy Eric. Then, over lunch on the big day, James' parents tell him that his father's job has, um, changed and they won't be able to give him the trip as a gift. There will be no Paris. Instead, it will be back to Pittsburgh and a summer job.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) James (Jesse Eisenberg) is an earnest young man, a dutiful son, who accepts his temporary fate. So, he gets on the phone, replying to classified ads in the paper. In one scene, he's trying to sell himself (and his degree in comparative literature and Renaissance studies) to a prospective employer: "Well, I've never driven an asphalt mixer, per se." That subtle humor is part of what gives "Adventureland" its realistic feel.

The film is writer-director Greg Mottola's semi-autobiographical dramedy, set in the Reagan years, complete with cars (including a Pacer) and music that jerks you back more than 30 years.

It's a fresh approach to that tired coming-of-age theme, with enough depth to counterbalance the sometimes-juvenile comedy. The credit goes to the character of James, who is so ready to start his adult life and finds himself trapped with his semi-neurotic parents (played ably by Wendie Malick and James Gilpin) in his childhood home, even reluctantly reuniting with his childhood "and still childish" pal, Tommy Frigo

(Matt Bush).

Eventually, James interviews at the local amusement park "Adventureland" run by oddball Bobby and his ditzy wife Paulette ("Saturday Night Live" vets Bill Hader and Kristen Wiig).

"James. Am I pronouncing that right, James?" Bobby says, highlighting a script filled with quirky characters.

They're stereotypes, yes. But they're more than that thanks to Mottola. He shows us that these on-the-surface losers want what everyone wants out of life, something bigger, something better.

James gets to know them all after he gets the job, though not the one he wanted. He'd like to work the park's rides, but Bobby gives him games. James gets a tour of the place, where he learns what we already know "that most of the games are rigged" and a warning that no one is to win the big prize, a giant stuffed panda. Ever.

He meets Em (Kristen Stewart), who becomes both a friend and an impromptu mentor, showing him the ropes. She's secretly involved with the park stud and maintenance man, Connell (Ryan Reynolds), who has managed to convince his young co-workers he once jammed with Lou Reed. Oh, and he's married.

But James really connects with Joel (Martin Starr), who smokes a pipe and loves Russian literature. And there's Lisa P (Margarita Levieva), the girl everyone wants and can't have. She takes a liking to sweet, virginal James, the only one who doesn't pant after her.

As the summer unfolds, so do their lives, complete with awkward sexual moments and a drinking and driving

scene that is treated a little too lightly. But it all feels genuine as they search for who they are and how they will get to where they really want to be. Well, except for Bobby and Paulette, who make it hysterically clear they're quite comfortable in their little empire.

Eisenberg is very strong as the central character and Stewart shines in a demanding role. All the acting reflects a cast that enjoys what it's doing, thanks to a director who lets them do it.

The story will ring true with anyone who has ever had to work a dead-end summer job but, more importantly, it will underline those seasonal friendships in life that, while brief, can leave a lasting impression.

"Adventureland." Rated: R. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. 3 stars.

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