

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "Little Miss Sunshine"

Not just any middle-of-the-road trip, "Little Miss Sunshine" is smooth cruising on the diamond lane all the way. Burn rubber, pop a wheelie, put the pedal to the metal--just get there. Even with the price of gas, this is one road trip pic you can't afford to miss.

(left to right): Greg Kinnear, Steve Carell, Paul Dano, Toni Collette, and Abigail Breslin. Photo © Multimedia In an opening montage, we get individual snapshots of the Hoover family. Front and center of this particular movie's solar system, daughter Olive (Abigail Breslin) imitates the winning beauty queen's reactions during a "Miss America" finale. Next we see father Richard (Greg Kinnear) echoing an almost parallel action as he rehearses his routine as a motivational speaker. The film then flashes on teenage son Dwayne (Paul Dano) rigorously exercising, Grandpa (Alan Arkin) snorting heroin, mom Sheryl (Toni Collette) driving and smoking up a storm, en route to the hospital to fetch her suicidal brother Frank (Steve Carell). Sheryl is honest to the point of blunt, glancing down at Frank's bandaged wrists with a "You want to talk, or no?" He doesn't. At least not until he's picking on fast food chicken with the rest of the Hoovers seated around the family dinner table. Egged on by little Olive, Frank tells his story. Although it's not all that funny, the fact that he relates specific sexual and emotional details to his 7-year-old niece lifts the scene to absurdity. Olive's reactions, along with everyone else's, not only give us great comedy, but reveal worlds about the six people we are about to join for the next 100 minutes.

The movie's theme of examining what "winning" means in these current superficial, superstar-esque times is driven home as the Hoovers, concurrently journeying outward and inward, meet up with their true selves along the way. Written by Michael Arndt, this character-driven road trip is stunning in its complex simplicity. Both Arndt and the husband and wife director team of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris masterfully orchestrate six different characters, playing them against each other, bringing out varying notes and tempos that create an ever-changing counterpoint. The family often divides into three duets (Mom and Dad; Olive and Grandpa;

Frank and Dwayne), allowing the audience to get a closer look at who they are and what they reveal when they are in the presence of their complement.

Of all the Hoovers, Greg Kinnear's Richard has the longest journey to get to his center. The longest to go, the farthest to fall, the highest to climb. By the end, he not only wins his family over, but the audience as well. Whereas Carell's Uncle Frank has us on his side immediately. As the outsider who can't believe his bad luck (a botched suicide followed by house arrest), he is our liaison into the wacky world of his relatives. Giving a beautifully nuanced and heartfelt portrayal, Carell continues to surprise as he takes on each new role. Collette's Sheryl is perfect in her imperfections, a mom who wishes the best for her children, yet loves them unconditionally. And her kids, God-bless-'em not overly cute, are an utter celebration, the very definition of "unique." Lastly there's Grandpa, a senior citizen who can't find a reason not to snort heroin, with Arkin playing shades of comic poignancy and reasoned rage at the same time. When an iconic film actor such as Arkin approaches his advancing years, literally advancing right before our very eyes, we appreciate these senior turns all the more. Hopefully not a swan song, this performance is a present to us all, a reminder of the six decades of extraordinary work he has given to the American cinema.

And speaking of gifts to the American cinema: "Little Miss Sunshine," a Sundance Film Festival favorite, might be the very best film of the year. Think of it as an early Christmas present. Enjoy.

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

"Little Miss Sunshine" Directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris Screenplay by Michael Arndt
Cast: Greg Kinnear, Steve Carell, Toni Collette, Alan Arkin, Paul Dano, Abigail Breslin Rated: R Running
Time: 101 minutes Grade: A

The Screen Savor: "YELLOW FEVER"™ by Kimberly_Gadette