
July 26, 2006

MOVIE REVIEW

'Little Miss Sunshine': You're Either on the Family Bus, or You're OffBy **MANOHLA DARGIS****Correction Appended**

The family that pops Prozac together stays together, perhaps, but the family that piles into an old Volkswagen bus the color of a banana surely has more entertainment value. That at least seems true of the happily (for us) unhappy relations at the center of the bittersweet comedy of dysfunction ["Little Miss Sunshine,"](#) a tale about genuine faith and manufactured glory that unwinds in the American Southwest, but more rightly takes place at the terminus of the American dream, where families are one bad break away from bankruptcy.

Written by the newcomer Michael Arndt, and directed by the husband-and-wife team of [Jonathan Dayton](#) and [Valerie Faris](#), seasoned music-video directors making an effortless feature-film debut, "Little Miss Sunshine" relates the story of the Hoovers, just around the time that the youngish, harried Sheryl ([Toni Collette](#)) takes her suicidal brother, Frank ([Steve Carell](#)), under her wing. ("I'm glad you're here," she says. "That makes one of us," he answers.) Straight from the hospital, Frank moves in with Sheryl's family, including her 7-year-old daughter, Olive (Abigail Breslin); teenage son, Dwayne (Paul Dano); husband, Richard ([Greg Kinnear](#)); and father-in-law, a heroin-tooting crank simply called Grandpa ([Alan Arkin](#)).

The bandages on Frank's wrists are as fresh as his wounds when he enters the Hoovers' fold, a dim burrow filled with clutter and noise. Eccentric families are a mainstay of comedy, and at least in their schematized personalities (the sullen son, the desperate dad), the Hoovers are not much different from most, despite the vials of white powder tucked in Grandpa's fanny pack. They may be more downmarket than [Wes Anderson's](#) Tenenbaums and a lot scruffier than the average big-studio clan. (Their kitchen looks as if it hasn't been remodeled since Alice slaved for the Bradys.) But like most American comedy families, they are also a familiar social microcosm, a group of radically individualized souls in search of one another.

The means to that end is the competition of the film's title, a child beauty pageant called Little Miss Sunshine. Soon after Frank moves in, Olive, a dumpling of a child with oversize glasses and a seemingly endless reserve of optimism, receives unexpected word that she has been invited to compete in Little Miss Sunshine, just days away. Short of cash if not bright ideas, Richard decides to pile the fractious, reluctant brood into the family's antique VW bus so that Olive can live out her dream and prove herself a winner. Much like Steinbeck's Joads, the Beverly Hillbillies and millions of other westward-ho pioneers, the notably named Hoovers set a course for California, the land of sunshine, bleached teeth and eternal promise, leaving dusty Albuquerque behind.

"Little Miss Sunshine" doesn't look particularly ambitious, in terms of either its narrative or its function-over-form visual style. But tucked in between all the hurt and the jokes, the character development and the across-the-board terrific performances is a surprisingly sharp look at contemporary America, one that sets the metaphor of the stage (and, by extension, competition)

against the cherished myth of the open road. Like her father, who's peddling a get-rich scheme, and like her brother, who yearns to fly the coop by becoming a jet pilot, Olive lives in a fantasy world that has become more real than her own life. When she watches a video of Miss America accepting her tiara, the image flickers in her eyeglasses, but it might as well be projected on her frontal lobe.

It's on the road that the Hoovers first lose and then find themselves, both as individuals and as a family. There is engine trouble, naturally, which leads to a delightful sight gag that involves Richard tucked behind the wheel as the rest of the family pushes — then scrambles inside — the bus. An emblem of an earlier, possibly more freewheeling era, this temporary mobile home seems an unlikely vehicle for transformation, but it takes the Hoovers across state lines and through a series of emotional and psychological roadblocks. In between the fast-food joints, hot tears and hurled insults, there are wide-open spaces and a suggestion of freedom along with a sign for the "Carefree Highway," an actual state route that here seems more like a cruel joke.

For the most part, the jokes and the sensibility are more kind than not in "Little Miss Sunshine," which motors forward on the strength of its seamless ensemble and direction, and its touching human comedy. Mr. Arndt unleashes scads of deftly funny one-liners and situations, the best of which float along on sheer absurdity, like the collision between some pornographic rags and Marcel Proust. The jokes don't land as lightly when they come with a message tied to the punch line, especially as the Hoovers near the Little Miss Sunshine competition, a ghastly spectacle that features underage fleshpots writhing to pounding beats while weighed down by sequins and parental vainglory. [Graham Greene's](#) description of [Shirley Temple's](#) appeal as "interestingly decadent" could not be more apt.

However true to life, the Little Miss Sunshine competition comes accompanied by a whiff of class snobbishness. Richard weighs in as a total middle manager, the type of man who has read one too many self-help books. But, as the nods to Proust and Nietzsche suggest — and that VW bus, with its intimation of 1960's rebellion, underscores — the Hoovers are clearly not meant to be cut from the same tacky cloth as the rest of the pageant parents, who smother their daughters in spray-on bronzer and expectation. In a different film, one not as generous of spirit (or funny), that snobbishness might seem insufferable. Yet there's a melancholy here that clings to this family, which however triumphant and united, may well remain stuck in the national Hooversville located at the crossroads of hope and despair.

"Little Miss Sunshine" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). The film has some salty language, but nothing anyone sentient hasn't heard before.

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

Opens today in New York and Los Angeles.

Directed by [Jonathan Dayton](#) and [Valerie Faris](#); written by Michael Arndt; director of photography, Tim Suhrstedt; edited by Pamela Martin; music by Mychael Danna; production designer, Kalina Ivanov; produced by Marc Turtletaub, David T. Friendly, Peter Saraf, Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa; released by Fox Searchlight Pictures. Running time: 101 minutes.

WITH: [Greg Kinnear](#) (Richard), [Toni Collette](#) (Sheryl), [Steve Carell](#) (Frank), Paul Dano (Dwayne), Abigail Breslin (Olive) and [Alan Arkin](#) (Grandpa).

Correction: July 31, 2006

A film review on Wednesday about "Little Miss Sunshine" referred incorrectly to contestants in the fictional children's beauty pageant of the title. The critic intended to compare the contestants to underage prostitutes, not to "underage fleshpots."

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