

At the movies

'Brighton Beach Memoirs' evokes humor and nostalgia

The year is 1937. The place is Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York. The main character is Eugene Morris Jerome, a humorously perceptive 15-year-old boy confronting the obstacles of adolescence, particularly sex, while his family struggles to endure the hardships of the Great Depression.

Review by Kevin Long

This movie adaptation based upon the Neil Simon play, "Brighton Beach Memoirs," which was first performed on stage in 1982, heartily captures the difficult situations and severe circumstances that many people faced during the Depression, while also showing some of the potentially positive consequences of that crisis, such as its ability to bring families closer together and make people appreciate the simple things in life, like a job, food at mealtimes, and each other.

In the beginning of the movie we meet the witty and comical Eugene (Jonathan Silverman) while he is in his backyard pretending to be a pitcher for the New York Yankees, one of his two major obsessions. A little while later we learn that he is keeping a diary of sorts, which he refers to as his private memoirs, and that a career in writing is not out of the question since he believes one must be un-

mistakably Italian to be a great ballplayer. Eugene is Jewish and his mother prepares spaghetti with ketchup, hence he believes his chances are shot.

Eugene serves as our guide throughout the movie, and as such, he narrates in some parts of the movie and soliloquizes at other points, thereby keeping us abreast of any vital information we need while also providing additional humorous depth to the movie.

While Eugene is continually reaching new highs in his obsessions with sex, his family falls further into the circumstantial turmoil of the Depression, and it is here that the story begins to develop in several directions. There are the loss of jobs, arguments among family members, situations concerning morals and ethics, Eugene's adolescent grooming, and affecting hints of World War II. All of these factors combine to amplify the harsh economic and political conditions of the Depression but in the end we are treated to a very interesting and enjoyable conclusion.

All the characters are excellently cast and each gives an outstanding performance. This is doubly important because most of the movie is confined to the family house and surrounding area and, as an audience, we rely heavily upon the quality of acting to entertain us and not simply catchy chase scenes or flashy special effects.

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Weir ("Witness," and "The Year of Living Dangerously"), the film seems to belong more to screenwriter Paul Schrader, noted screenwriter of "Taxi Driver" and "Raging Bull" and director of "Mishima" and many more films. Like the characters in many of Schrader's works, Allie is a man driven by his own unrecognized obsessions, so driven that he loses sight of those around him.

Allie is desperate to create, to amaze and to impress (the reason for his inventions?). When something becomes taken for granted he searches for another mountain to climb.

The screenplay is rich in implied contradiction and irony, but director Weir makes little of the opportunities to explore these conflicts. A scene rife with promise shows the Fox children, playing with the village kids, creating a pseudo-capitalist play town they call Anchor, where leaves are used for money and the children take on roles of banker, storekeeper, schoolteacher and such. They construct a game based on their memories of home life, but after

one brief scene the issue is laid to rest.

What Weir can do is create vivid characters and he has found one in Allie Fox, a genius whose grandiose visions are limited by the myopic demands of his self-centered needs. Harrison Ford gives his finest performance to date (he is sure to get an Oscar nomination) as the driven Allie and he succeeds in presenting the character in a tragic light.

It is clear that Allie hasn't come to the Mosquito Coast to bring civilization but to create his own vision of a perfect world, with himself as inventor-philosopher king. It's a world that has no room for faith, only science and reason (thus his conflict with Spellgood), yet on the darker side Allie cannot understand his own (unscientific) drives and cannot accept the similar emotional needs of others, his family in particular. As Allie becomes more demanding and dictatorial he is quite easy to dislike, yet moments of weakness and vulnerability show through. We can in no way approve of his actions, but

neither can we abandon him.

What Weir misses in this aspect is a crucial melding of the character's contradictions. In one scene Allie is the good father, in another the frustrated pioneer, but in none are we given an opportunity to see these two opposites drift back and forth. Schrader's work brilliantly explores how inner drives manifest themselves in the personalities of his characters, how they change and how these personalities outwardly manifest certain contradictions. Weir only scratches the surface of these contradictions.

"The Mosquito Coast" is a fine motion picture highlighted by powerful performances and a spellbinding story, but the promise inherent in the script is not fulfilled in the finished film. It's not hard to understand why; the film is a great risk to begin with because of its downbeat nature and the disturbing transformation of Allie Fox. By dismissing the more challenging contradictions in the screenplay, however, the film comes off as a mild disappointment.

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