

WHAT SILVER LINING?

Silver Linings Playbook *stumbles over clichés in the face of mental illness*

SILVER LININGS PLAYBOOK: Directed by David O. Russell. Screenplay by Russell, based on the novel by Matthew Quick. Cinematography, Masanobu Takayanagi. Editors, Jay Cassidy and Crispin Struthers. Music, Danny Elfman. Starring Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence, Robert De Niro, Jacki Weaver and Chris Tucker. The Weinstein Company, 2012. R. 122 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

David O. Russell's *Silver Linings Playbook*, now heavy under the weight of award-season expectations, is trying to be one (or more) of the following three things: 1. A romantic comedy; 2. A movie about mental illness, and 3. A peculiar send-up of one or both of these options.

The movie's very basic structure fits the rom-com mold: Brokenhearted guy Pat (Bradley Cooper, in permanent stubble) loses girl — spectacularly; he has a violent manic episode after finding her in the shower with another man. In the process of desperately trying to win the girl back, he meets another girl to whom he is more suited. Hijinks and

plot points unfold, and after overcoming some obstacle, a happy ending is found.

Silver Linings is neither romantic nor all that funny. The first problem has a lot to do with the chemistry between Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence, who plays Tiffany, the black-clad, surly younger woman who makes a deal with Pat: She'll help him get a letter to his ex if he'll help her by being her partner for a dance competition. As two troubled people building a tentative friendship while using each other, they're perfect; she's tart and bossy, and he's desperate and off his meds. Nothing about them suggests that they should get together, except that the rom-com structure pretty much demands it.

This brings us to possibility two: *Silver Linings* is a movie about mental illness. After discovering his wife's infidelity, Pat is institutionalized for eight months with bipolar disorder; at the movie's start, his warm, worried mother, Dolores (Jacki Weaver), brings him home. Pat spits

out his meds and is tirelessly manic; obsessed with getting Nikki back, and unable to comprehend why that's not likely. Cooper's wide-open all-American face suits him well, making his mania convincingly present. He knows things that no one else understands. He has a plan. He's getting Nikki back. But he needs Tiffany's help.

Pat and Tiffany bond over their meds and their losses; her husband died not too long ago, and the movie isn't clear on whether Tiffany is responding to grief or actually diagnosed with a mental illness (I lean toward the former). But no one really acknowledges the other mental illness in the room: Pat Sr. (Robert De Niro)'s obsessive compulsiveness is something the audience is comfortable laughing at. Maybe this is because a lot of Pat Sr.'s behavior comes out as intense sports fan belief in "juju" — things have to be just so, or the Eagles won't win (pay attention, Chip Kelly). Things have to be just so, or he'll lose everything he's bet on the game.

Either way, I can't laugh at a man so tightly in the grip of his compulsions. Maybe most people can, and that's why *Silver Linings* is seen as a comedy. But there's the other thing it might be: Maybe *Silver Linings* is somehow a very sly, too-subtle send-up of the other kinds of movies it's trying to be, and it's using mental illness to deepen and darken its purposeful string of pointed clichés. Otherwise, why have Chris Tucker, playing Pat's just-a-little-crazier buddy from the hospital, tell Pat and Tiffany that their dance routine will be better if they "black it up"? Why see sports fans as often violent, racist, and almost destructively obsessive, create a female character whose "craziness" manifests as promiscuity, and bring everything to a close in which everybody's just fine and dandy? Though *Silver Linings* deserves credit for its portrayal of the middle ground of mental illness, it's as much of a mess as its characters, veering between tone-deafness and deep sympathy, convincing portrayal and cheap cliché. ■

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BILL W. THE COMEDY	6:00 8:30	2:20 5:00 7:45	2:20 5:00 7:45	2:20 5:00 7:45	RUST AND BONE 5:00 7:45	5:00 7:45	5:00 7:45	5:00 7:45
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