

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

The Florida Project, about beautiful losers shackled up in a fleabag motel, is the best film of the year

There's one scene in particular that perfectly captures the generous, heartbreaking humanity animating *The Florida Project*, director Sean Baker's tragicomic ode to the tattered residents of a flea-bitten motel in the heart of Florida's commercialized wasteland of strip malls and amusement parks.

In the scene, the motel's long-suffering manager, Bobby (Willem Dafoe), addresses a trio of flamingos that have wandered into the driveway outside the main office. Like some middle-aged Christ, weary and sun-scorched but infinitely patient, Bobby explains to the "girls" that he's already warned them about the threat of getting run over, so maybe they'd best just move along. The birds look at him quizzically.

Bobby, with a sigh, reiterates his warming, shooing them gently. After a pause, the birds reluctantly turn and, with several backward looks, bored and defiant, they all tiptoe lazily into the grass like cotton balls on stilts.

The implication is that this is a daily routine, with the beleaguered manager saving the birds from their own avian stupidity with loving concern and baffled exhaustion, both parties trapped in an absurd ritual that may indeed recapitulate the fallen nature of the universe itself.

Dafoe has never been better, and he's not even the best thing about *The Florida Project*. At the heart of the film is 6-year-old Moonee, the ringleader of a gaggle of latchkey kids whose parents, in various stages of delinquency, disarray and trouble with the law, have established temporary residence at the motel.

Played with painful authenticity by Brooklynn Prince, Moonee confronts the surreality of her world — the garish and outsized consumer hell of theme-park Florida, an infantilized adult fantasia whose humid neon facade belies the human wreckage that scurries in its shadows — with the defiant spirit of childhood: feisty, charming and free-spirited, aggressively joyful and yet vulnerable, and ever defiant in the face of the suffering that threatens to swallow her whole. Prince's performance here is flat-out amazing; she steals every scene she's in.

Moonee's mother, Halley (the equally fantastic Bria Vinaite), is a wayward millennial, a bus-stop single mother in tats and tank top who lies and cheats and steals and turns tricks to survive, and who loves her daughter with all her heart. Halley and Moonee are mirrors of each other, survivors caught at ground zero of the failed American experiment. They are that "other half" rarely represented in movies, and never have they been so captured in all their flailing, glorious, complicated humanity.

The arc of *The Florida Project* is loping and gangly, a film that gathers momentum slowly as it presents a series of vignettes evoking the daily struggles of people whose downward trajectory is merely house odds in modern society. And yet the film refuses to present these people as victims; rather, it seeks to evoke them in all their complex humanity. It rescues their lives from the classic Hollywood sump of melodrama, bestowing upon them the dignity they so furiously fight to maintain.

Baker, as director, keeps the focus tight on the kids who

populate the motel, granting us entrance into their secret world, and in so doing he suffuses his film with a childlike sense of awe that is hypnotic and often exuberant. And yet, always lurking in the corners is the adult world, which is violent and scary and confusing. That world dooms childhood from within and without, an inevitability that no Disney fantasy can ward off.

The Florida Project refuses to avert its eyes from that "other half" of society, the disenfranchised teenaged moms and unschooled youth and half-baked gangstas who receive little but our frustration and condemnation. The movie also refuses to judge them, instead treating them as the valid dramatic subjects they are, neither good nor bad but living makes them such.

Trapped between the big bad world and the folks who can't quite get it together is Bobby, the manager whose efforts to protect Moonee and Halley look a lot like the strangled benediction of Christ's love (in a way, then, this is at least the second time Dafoe has played Jesus). The religious subtext of a depraved and fallen world is amplified by the fact that *The Florida Project* is the early name of the Walt Disney World Resort.

The film takes this irony and fleshes it out fully, and the results are profound. It's a beautiful and heartbreaking film, a moving parable about the loss of innocence that restores childhood to its proper place in art — not as a cutesy byproduct of adults' wishful thinking, but as a sacred value whose shrinking realm of safety tells us exactly what we've become. (*Broadway Metro*) ■

BROADWAY **NOVEMBER 3-9**

METRO

THE FLORIDA PROJECT
FRI-TUE 11:45 2:10 2:25 5:00
7:10 7:40 9:40 10:00
WED-THU 11:45 2:10 2:25 5:00
7:40 9:40 10:00

DINA
ONE WEEK ONLY
DAILY 11:45 4:45

LUCKY
FRI-WED 11:45 1:40 3:40
5:40 7:40 9:35
THU 11/9 11:45 1:40 3:40
5:40 7:40

BLADE RUNNER 2049
DAILY 2:00 5:30 8:45

CONOR MCGREGOR: NOTORIOUS
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THE ROYAL OPERA: LA BOHÈME
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A rare glimpse into the relationship between beloved children's author A. A. Milne (Domhnall Gleeson) and his son Christopher Robin, whose toys inspired the magical world of Winnie the Pooh.
1:15, 3:45, 6:15, 8:45

BREATHE (PG-13)
The inspiring true love story of Robin and Diana Cavendish (Andrew Garfield, Claire Foy), an adventurous couple who refuse to give up in the face of a devastating disease.
Friday - Wednesday 1:00, 6:00
Thursday 2:30 pm

BATTLE OF THE SEXES (PG-13)
The true story of the electrifying 1973 tennis match between World number one Billie Jean King (Emma Stone) and ex-champ and serial hustler Bobby Riggs (Steve Carell). From the directors of LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE.
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IMAX: THOR: RAGNAROK 3D [CC,DV] (PG-13) ★
Fri. - Sat. 10:00 PM 10:15 PM

LBJ [CC] (R) Fri. - Sat. (1130 215) 455 730 1010

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JIGSAW [CC,DV] (R) Fri. - Sat. (1220 250) 530 800 1035

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GEOSTORM [CC,DV] (PG-13)
Fri. - Sat. (1250 PM 345 PM) 630 PM

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FOREIGNER [CC,DV] (R) Fri. - Sat. (1140 AM) 550 PM 845 PM

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MARSHALL [CC,DV] (PG-13) Fri. - Sat. (230 PM)

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Fri. - Sat. (1110 AM) 900 PM

VICTORIA AND ABDUL [CC,DV] (PG-13)
Fri. - Sat. (110 355) 650 935