

Sunshine Cleaning: A misplaced sense of where the drama (or comedy) lies

By David Walsh
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Directed by Christine Jeffs, screenplay by Megan Holley

In *Sunshine Cleaning*, Rose Lorkowski (Amy Adams) is struggling to stay afloat as she raises a son on her own in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A former cheerleader in high school, who dated the school's star athlete, Rose is now cleaning houses for a living and carrying on a dispiriting affair with that former sweetheart, Mac (Steve Zahn), now a married policeman.

Her younger sister Norah (Emily Blunt), generally unemployed and with no particular ambition to stir herself, still lives at home with their father (Alan Arkin). Norah's anger at the world seems bound up with her mother's suicide when the sisters were young.

When Rose's son is expelled from school for his eccentric behavior and enrolling him in private school will involve considerable expense, she and Norah go into business for themselves: cleaning up crime scenes, a "growth industry." With the help of Winston (Clifton Collins Jr.), a cleaning supplies-store owner, the two women begin to make headway in the somewhat grisly occupation until Norah commits a seriously careless act.

The film, directed by Christine Jeffs (*Sylvia*), has its appealing elements, beginning with the two leads, Adams and Blunt. That neither talented performer is entirely convincing in her respective role has more to do with the limitations of the script and, beyond that, the limitations of the filmmakers' conception of things.

It is difficult to see Rose as a self-described "loser," with presumably ten or fifteen years of hard labor and frustration, and "illicit" relationships, behind her. Such a history would have taken more of an emotional and physical toll. This Rose is all too youthful, perky and energetic.

Likewise, Blunt's Norah, is simply too at ease in the world to fit into the category nominally assigned her by the screenplay: alienated, caustic, anti-social. She could hardly be more charming and amusing. Blunt is a delight to watch, but her comic turn tends to work against the film's truthfulness.

Rose's economic condition, scrambling to get by, juggling jobs and other obligations, staring at a fairly bleak future, strikes a chord because it is a common one. Millions of people in the US, in large and small communities alike, are in the same boat. They are hanging on by their fingernails, financially and, in some cases, psychically.

Sunshine Cleaning, like numerous American films at present, independent and commercial alike, flirts with social reality—alternately approaching, veering away from, touching upon and avoiding it. The filmmakers, not as a result, first and foremost, of their own personal failings, do not yet know how seriously to take the social crisis. They are not yet convinced this is a phenomenon whose implications they need to work through.

This uncertainty and tentativeness, and a desire to hedge one's bets, helps account for the unsettling combination of moods and impulses in *Sunshine Cleaning*, which opens with a respectably dressed, professional-looking man blowing his head off with a shotgun.

Seeing the film at the end of a four-week period in which seven mass shootings have occurred in the US, the spectator is not perhaps so prone to treat the notion of "crime scene clean-up" too glibly.

Reportedly, the idea for the film came to screenwriter Megan Holley after she heard an item on the radio about the flourishing business of crime scene clean-up. By and large, Holley took the line of least resistance

and turned this circumstance into an occasion for relatively easy laughs at the mere oddity and grossness of the occupation.

Americans, including artists, take so many aspects of their current awful reality for granted. Isn't it telling that desperate people earn a living out of cleaning up the disasters created by even more desperate people? The startling "growth" of this "industry"—dependent on murder, suicide, auto accidents and general mayhem—results, in the final analysis, from the "decay" of other "industry," which is driving the increase in violence.

The spectator might tease out these conclusions for him or herself, but is less likely to do so because the filmmakers' have not apparently thought much of this through for themselves.

Of course, set out in such dry language the circumstance seems far from amusing, but, in the first place, *Sunshine Cleaning* does not shy away entirely from the tragic elements at play and, moreover, there is no reason why a more all-sided look at the situation could not have had darkly ironic and comic possibilities. As it is, the film tends to skim the surface, getting the occasional laugh here, pulling at the heart-strings there, when it ought to do considerably more.

The various elements do not fully cohere, in my view, because the writer and director have a misplaced sense of where the real drama or comedy lies.

Insofar as they are not blind to what is going on in the world, the filmmakers first place Rose's economic struggles and resulting adventures, and not only hers, at the center of the film. Not satisfied, however, that this is sufficiently moving or entertaining, they then graft on in a largely unconvincing and contrived manner, a "personal drama," i.e., the two sisters' trauma over the loss of their mother. Little by little, this strand of the story becomes the dominant one and the social problem recedes into the background.

Things are turned upside down in this way. Rose's concrete, material, pressing social circumstance, along with the awful (sometimes comically awful) things people are forced to do to survive in America, is reduced to a secondary issue and a generic, formulaic, 'universal' story of abandonment (through suicide) of children by a parent presses forward as the "real, human" element. The filmmakers do not grasp that in

the "mere" economic-social question lies hidden so much of human aspiration, emotion and "real drama."

In the end, old moods and habits, products of a previous period, prevail. Complacency emerges as the largest winner. But the various elements are at least at war with one another, and that is something.

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