

Away We Go: Parent trap

By Joanne Laurier
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Away We Go is British director Sam Mendes's third attempt to deal with social reality in the United States—the film is no more successful than *American Beauty* and *Revolutionary Road*.

Possibly the least complex and most self-satisfied of the three works, the comic *Away We Go* centers on Burt (John Krasinski) and Verona (Maya Rudolph), a couple in their 30s who must stop living like blithe, irresponsible young people and “grow up” after she unexpectedly becomes pregnant. The pair begin a cross-country trek to find the perfect place to create a “Huck Finn-y” environment for their child, and along the way encounter a variety of parenting techniques.

(The filmmakers and most critics seem to interpret the “Huck Finn” reference as synonymous with a wholesome, bucolic, ‘all-American’ upbringing. But Huck Finn grew up in poverty, his father was a racist drunkard and Huck had to fake his own death and escape down the Mississippi with a refugee slave to have any kind of a life....)

Verona's parents are deceased, but the first example of what *not to do* is provided by Burt's father and mother (Jeff Daniels and Catherine O'Hara), so oblivious and self-absorbed that they plan on moving to Antwerp one month before the birth of their grandchild.

Next, Phoenix appeals to them, where Verona's former workmate Lily (Allison Janney) awaits. However, the couple have barely stepped out of the airport before Lily's wildly dysfunctional family sends them fleeing. Lily drinks during the day, and ridicules and alienates her children, telling Verona and Burt that “kids are genetically predetermined. They're screwed up in the womb.”

In Madison, Wisconsin—the next stop—Burt's “cousin” LN (formerly known as Ellen) (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a feminist, New Age college professor terroristically adheres to the Three S's: No Separation, No Sugar and No Strollers. Her stay-at-home,

pontificating husband Roderick (Josh Hamilton) envies the male sea-horse for its ability to carry its young. “No separation” from the children literally means no separation, even in the bedroom. Things turn ugly.

Then, Montreal could possibly fit the bill because gravy on French fries is a staple. College friends Munch and Tom (Melanie Lynskey and Chris Messina) and their brood of multi-racial, adopted kids appear to lead an idyllic life—until the sad reality of Munch's five miscarriages peculiarly makes itself felt, in a karaoke bar no less!

Finally...Burt's brother in Miami, whose wife has recently abandoned him and their young daughter for unknown reasons. Feeling unable to compensate for the loss, the now single-dad believes the girl is destined to become an introvert and a “bad dresser.”

Verona and Burt conclude that “all we can do is be good for the one baby.... We don't have control over much else.”

Away We Go is initially pleasing. There are several humorous moments and a relaxed, sweet relationship between Krasinski and Rudolph. O'Hara is her usual charming and wacky self, and both Janney and Gyllenhaal are amusing and create, albeit without much sympathy, loosely recognizable personalities deserving of criticism.

However, whatever is genuine and entertaining about Krasinski as a disarming goofball and Rudolph as his nurturer and anchor gets worn down by the narrowness and banality of the movie's theme as it comes into focus. Nor is it a plus that the work is punctuated by the irritating songs of Alexi Murdoch and that every city feels essentially the same, despite distinct design features and artful cinematography.

Mendes has by and large created an assortment of outlandish “archetypes,” to serve as foils to his central characters and throw into relief what “perfect parenting” might be. The majority of the secondary

characters are more schematic than three-dimensional. The more Verona and Burt distance themselves from the examples of bad child-rearing, the less tolerant and interesting they become—more mouthpiece than human. It follows logically that Burt and Verona would and do choose to isolate themselves from the world's parenting foibles—a fairly generic fantasy in certain social layers.

Along the same contrived lines, much of the human interaction that takes place in *Away We Go* functions as little more than plot mechanism. This makes for a rapid-fire series of improbable scenarios: It is unlikely that Burt and Verona would be friends with the remarkably crude Lily (Janney); it is unlikely they would turn LN's house upside down despite their disagreements with her lifestyle; and it is most *likely* that Burt's parents are mere contrivances. Moreover, the manner by which Burt and Verona arrive at major decisions is infantile. And there is something a bit sour about the film's views on adoption.

That nobody in the movie has money worries is telling. While both Verona and Burt have jobs, it doesn't seem to matter when and if they do work. During their travels, Burt does make the occasional phone call, assuming a loud, implausible persona for the benefit of his insurance company colleagues.

Overall, the film offers a shallow impression of America. As one reviewer put it: "*Away We Go* is a film for nice people to see." The movie's production notes give a clue as to who these "nice people" might be.

Screenwriters Dave Eggers and Vendela Vida reveal that initially they intended Burt and Verona to leave the US for Costa Rica: "We wrote the script during a different administration, so that seemed like the only rational way to deal with the situation—to flee to a country that had basically never been involved in any conflict."

This is significant. It suggests that for certain social circles, the election of Barack Obama solved the great vexing problems: war (in the film there is a perfunctory student demonstration that is not anti-war, but anti-Bin Laden, implying that Afghanistan is the good war), the economy, and racism. In an interview, Mendes says: "We're talking about an era in which probably the most important person in the country is mixed race, and you've got this mixed race person [Rudolph] who's

part of this couple and that's never commented on."

Finally, under Obama, according to this reasoning, it is possible to turn one's attention to the real work of humanity, that is, various largely private matters—getting along with one's fellow creatures, acting rationally and sensibly, properly raising children.

In the production notes, *Away We Go* producer Edward Saxon spells it out: "The kinds of questions that Burt and Verona are asking themselves are one that all of us have to explore in our lives; 'How and where are we going to put down roots?' or 'What does it mean to have a family these days?'" "

The fact that things are getting worse and worse for large swaths of the populace does not intrude on the thinking of this privileged layer. This is not to their credit.

There is a connection between this type of small-mindedness and social insulation and the film's considerable artistic weaknesses. Mendes and his collaborators do not have the world right.

Moreover, hitching one's wagon to an Obama is a shortsighted and foolhardy venture for anyone, including an artist. Six months from now, perhaps a year, when mass opposition to the present administration erupts, how dated and irrelevant such works will look.

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