

# Little Miss Sunshine: High anxiety

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Little Miss Sunshine*, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris; written by Michael Arndt

Seasoned video and commercial makers Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris—a husband and wife team—have made their filmmaking debut with *Little Miss Sunshine*, a critique of the “winner-take-all” outlook in American life.

Screenwriter Michael Arndt was inspired to write the script upon hearing California Governor and former action film star Arnold Schwarzenegger declare: “If there’s one thing in this world I despise, it’s losers.” The result is a compassionate and sometimes humorous work that attempts to address the increasing insecurity and anxiety of layers of the US population forced to survive in a cut-throat environment.

The Hoovers (a reference to the Depression-era US president?) from Albuquerque, New Mexico, barely make the grade as a family unit. Father Richard (Greg Kinnear), a motivational speaker trying unsuccessfully to peddle his “Nine Steps to Success,” is the second husband of “pro-honesty” Sheryl (Toni Collette). Her brother Frank (Steve Carell) has recently attempted suicide after being jilted by his gay student lover and losing his standing as America’s pre-eminent Proust scholar.

Teenager Dwayne (Paul Dano), immersed in Nietzsche, has taken a vow of silence until he gets into the Air Force Academy. “Welcome to hell,” is his written greeting to Frank as the latter moves in with the family. Slightly pot-bellied, seven-year-old Olive (Abigail Breslin) is single-mindedly bent on becoming a beauty queen. Her coach, Grandpa (Alan Arkin), is a cynic and late-in-life convert to pornography and heroin (“I still got Nazis bullets in my head.”)

Mealtime is an occasion for Richard to pit his “power-of-positive-thinking” against the rest of the family’s depressive and dysfunctional behavior by appealing to them to banish their inner loser selves. Sheryl predictably responds with a desperate show of optimism. The reality for the family members is drab. In response, Grandpa promotes the idea that hedonism should be one’s death dance.

Olive, who finished second in a local contest, becomes eligible to compete in the national “Little Miss Sunshine”

child beauty pageant in California when the girl who beat her out for first place is disqualified as a diet-pill taker. Needing a change of pace—and Richard resolute on practicing what he preaches—the family boards its dilapidated Volkswagen van and heads west. Constantly on the verge of breakdown, the vehicle serves as a metaphor for the Hoovers’ precarious existence, in which every penny counts in the day-to-day struggle.

“I don’t want to be your family! I hate you people! I hate you! Divorce! Bankrupt! Suicide! You’re losers,” Dwayne blurts out in the middle of the trip, breaking a nine-month silence. The meltdown is a response to the puncturing of his dream of becoming a pilot (when he learns he’s color-blind). Crushed is his scheme to escape reality by wandering the skies. Soon after, Grandpa’s fatal drug overdose—made only worse by a cold-hearted hospital “bereavement liaison” official—threatens to turn the already tumultuous journey into an outright tragedy.

The road trip’s grueling experiences set the stage for a moment of collective self-awareness at the California pageant. As a grotesque form of child abuse, the beauty contest brings home to Richard and the others the nasty consequences of striving to be part of the “Winning Class,” a recklessly blind and egotistical quest. Being consumed with achieving has achieved nothing whatsoever.

*Little Miss Sunshine* contains a number of comic, and bruising, moments. A suicidal Frank is denied further care because the hospital has tapped the maximum of his insurance. A medical system looking after itself responds bureaucratically to the traumatic death of a family member. Young people, isolated and alienated, lacerate themselves trying to make sense of the world and find a secure and rational place in it.

The film’s major strength is its fairly cold-eyed look at the ceaseless and futile battle to maintain one’s footing on a social treadmill speeding out of control.

“Certainly in America,” says filmmaker Dayton, “we’re taught that if you work hard and play by the rules, you’ll be rewarded. What was interesting about this film is you have these guys who are trying their best to do what is expected of them and it may not pan out for them. We thought this

family was an interesting modern middle-class family because—even though they have a house and two cars—they’re actually teetering on the edge of financial disaster.”

Adds Faris, “We devalue experience and only value achievements and results.... So many people feel like they’re put to the test constantly. We’re such a winner-oriented society. America *has to be* the number one super power.”

This is not groundbreaking, but it is well meant. The film makes its most convincing and graphically realistic protest against the predominant ethos in the “Little Miss Sunshine” pageant scenes.

Child beauty contests first received mass media exposure as a result of the 1996 unsolved murder of six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey (now in the news once again). In these monstrous affairs, little girls are coiffed, heavily made-up, sprayed with tanning lotion, adorned with sequins and poured into showgirl outfits. They suggestively prance about the stage, with music telling them to “Work it! Own it!” This heart-breaking display of weird, miniature adults leaves a deep impression.

The film exposes the cruelty and perversity of the process: prepubescent girls trained to compete as sex dolls. How will this affect these children in the long run? What does it say about the society that invents and promotes such psychologically damaging circuses?

Having researched child beauty pageants and enlisted the aid of real contestants, the filmmakers present a harrowing picture. In the production notes, the movie’s creators refer to the challenge of attempting to balance “a kind of shocking authenticity with the film’s overall comic style.” While they managed, more or less, to pull this off, the impact of the “shocking authenticity” tends to dissipate when the Hoovers defiantly come together on stage in the segment’s final moments, even though the latter are cathartically endearing and amusing. In general, the film underestimates the severity of the social conditions it hints at portraying.

*Little Miss Sunshine* touches upon but never truly plumbs the depth of a situation in which the “modern middle-class family” is “teetering on the edge of financial disaster.” The film is simply not worked through sufficiently, neither from the point of view of its social critique, nor dramatically.

There are innumerable implausibilities in the story. In fact, to be honest, hardly any of the characters or their actions bear close scrutiny. The family atmosphere as a whole never truly reverberates with the type of anxiety the plot suggests. Richard, for his part, is simply too bright and able to be wasting his time trying to peddle yet another Tony Robbinsesque “plan for success.”

We are surprised to learn mid-way through the film that the parents have a reputation for constantly fighting, because both Richard and especially Sheryl (Collette’s character) are far too pleasant and civilized for such behavior. Various claims made about the family’s eccentric character simply do not ring true. One is led to believe, finally, that the filmmakers have never seen either true economic distress or true American family dysfunctionality in action.

Moreover, how is it that the overweight, and exceedingly normal Olive is even considered a potential pageant queen or called upon to compete? She would not be encouraged, much less tutored, by a hippie-like grandfather, experimenting in the counterculture and highly critical of bourgeois illusions. Nor, for that matter, would people like the Hoovers, with the possible exception of a Richard, be likely to support Olive’s goal.

With sexually transmitted diseases an epidemic, a sane grandfather is not apt to advocate, as Grandpa does, wild promiscuity.

The references to Nietzsche and Proust are cultural plugs, essentially left dangling. Inserted as a point of opposition to the crass, pragmatic “Nine Steps to Success,” they are intriguing and suggestive enough to be amusing, but are never fully explored. Also, no reason is given for Dwayne’s hatred of his family or why such a non-conformist would be interested in the military? And so on.

Like the rickety VW bus, things don’t quite hold together or always make sense. But one instinctively roots for the family and is prepared to overlook most of the inconsistencies and incongruities because the film is jaunty, refreshing and constructed with a degree of heart and intelligence. The characters are drawn with some care, although more convincing as types than when interacting with one another.

Not insignificantly, *Little Miss Sunshine*’s opening line, “There are two kinds of people in the world: winners and losers,” sets the film on course to indict a faltering society that blames the population for its failure. This helps explain why the characters and their troubles arouse interest and sympathy.

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