Written by Mike Schulz Wednesday, 20 December 2006 02:17



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS and CHARLOTTE'S WEB

A few days ago, in preparation for my forthcoming year-end recap, I was perusing the list of movies I've caught in 2006, and among my favorite cineplex offerings, I noticed several rather surprising themes. Very few family-friendly works, and none that were animated, despite the release of what felt like a new one every other week. An unusual preponderance of sequels and remakes. And, oddly, almost no works that really got to me emotionally - very few that made me cry.

I say "oddly" because it's pretty *easy* to get me to cry at the movies - if a tearjerker is designed well, I'll fall for it hook, line, and sinker - and in addition to their many other strengths, my favorite films of the past few years all have a habit of turning me into a weepy mess by their finales:

Murderball, Brokeback Mountain, Before Sunset,

**Murderball, Brokeback Mountain, Brokeback M

Million Dollar Baby, A Mighty Wind, Finding Nemo
(You wanna see something
really
embarrassing? Catch me after a six-hour
Angels in America
marathon; I'm
done
.)

It's not as if the movie year has been *completely* devoid of films that have really gotten to me. *U* nited 93

was one of the most wrenchingly emotional accomplishments I've seen in years - afterwards, it took about 20 minutes for me to compose myself before I could safely return to the office - and the amazement of that work was that it never

told

you how to feel; your emotions, it seemed, weren't ever being manipulated (as, I thought, they generally were in

World Trade Center

). Stranger Than Fiction is an intellectual

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tearjerker in that it becomes more and more affecting the longer you think about it - in a comic-booky way, so does

V for Vendetta

- and I admittedly got misty-eyed during a couple of scenes in

The Queen

and

Babel

And for sheer, unapologetic, I'm-crying-and-*loving*-it entertainment, very few recent movies can match the football drama

Invincible. Going in, you know exactly what you're going to get - an inspirational, triumph-of-the-underdog sports flick

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cible

attacks its built-in clichés with such sincerity, and unspools with such an absence of melodrama, that you don't feel like a sucker for falling for it. (It's everything

Gridiron Gang

and

Glory Road

tried to be but weren't.) Among 2006 releases,

Invincible

is Hollywood heart-tugging at its finest.

I had hoped that *The Pursuit of Happyness* would be, too. Based on the true story of stockbroker Chris Gardner (played here by Will Smith), director Gabriele Muccino's film follows this would-be entrepreneur through a particularly harsh time in the early '80s. Struggling with his career as a hospital-to-hospital salesman - he sells bone-density scanners that are cumbersome, costly, and do their job only *slightly* b etter than X-rays - Gardner finds himself unable to pay the bills, abandoned by his exasperated wife (Thandie Newton), and put in the position of raising his five-year-old son, Christopher (Smith's actual son, Jaden Christopher Syre Smith) on his own. But Gardner has one hope for upward mobility - a stockbroker internship that, upon completion of the program, will either secure him a high-paying career or return him to his life of ignominy and poverty.

There are no points for guessing how all this turns out, nor *should* there be. No audience for a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps Hollywood entertainment starring Will Smith - and released during the *holidays*, no less! -

expects to see their hero as anything but triumphant at the end; we're watching

The Pursuit of Happyness

because we

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want

to see Will Smith (and his adorable son) prevail.

Both Smith and Muccino know this, of course, and so it's to their credit that the movie features as many honest moments as it does. Muccino's filmmaking has an unfussy, rough-edged quality that's very appealing - the composition isn't slick, which I mean as the highest praise - and Smith, who easily could have gotten by on sheer charm, doesn't coast; he gives an emotionally committed portrayal with undercurrents of simmering self-loathing. (In his best scene, after the Gardners are locked out of their motel room with their belongings stacked outside, Smith takes several long beats where he just stares at the motel-room door, and you wait for him to either explode in rage or break down in sobs. He does neither, eventually gathering his possessions and - his pride barely masking his humiliation - walking away.)

Smith and the supporting cast perform the inherent melodrama with admirable tact - young Jaden is wonderfully naturalistic - and the film is never as heavy-handed as you fear it might be. But there's something oppressive about *Happyness*' sentimentality that, for me at least, keeps it from being a first-rate tearjerker; the movie continually eschews its honest impulses in favor of the standard audience-goosing. Gardner's downward trajectory is too neatly designed by screenwriter Steven Conrad, and there are a few coincidences - such as Gardner consistently, "coincidentally" stumbling upon figures from his past - that strain the film's believability. Mucchino's recurring visual motif - Gardner, his mind racing, working out his next move while Christopher sleeps with his head against his dad's chest - recurs a few times too many, and the movie goes out of its way to present Gardner as a noble victim without really addressing his personal culpability; Thandie Newton is turned into a shrill harridan, and the filmmakers don't seem much interested in the fact that, under the circumstances, her hatefulness is *understandable*

.

And all the while, Andrea Guerra's musical score won't leave us alone, telegraphing the film's emotions and making sure we always know *exactly* how to feel. By the end of *The Pursuit of Happyness*, I did

well up a little, mostly because Smith plays his climactic scene of validation with such understated grace. It's an acceptable tearjerker, but it isn't what it should have been - a *glorious* one.

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