

Curveballs: "Sugar"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 27 April 2009 06:48

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SUGAR

Let's face it: For area audiences, it's easy to be psyched about Anna Boden's and Ryan Fleck's baseball drama *Sugar*, large portions of which were filmed locally in the summer of 2007.

There is, of course, a considerable kick in viewing the Davenport stadium Modern Woodmen Park and the neighboring Centennial Bridge in all of their big-screen splendor, and when I caught the film at an opening-day matinée, I'll admit that I found it tough not to giggle with excitement whenever a familiar face, or even a familiar *edifice*, appeared. (Among my personal thrills were the appearances by performing pals Barb Engstrom in a speaking role and Liz J. Millea singing the national anthem, and if you know where to look, you can even see the *Reader* building in a couple of long shots.)

Yet for me - and, I'm guessing, for a lot of local audiences - the biggest joy isn't that the Quad Cities and its denizens are so prominently featured, but that they're featured in such a damned good movie. A sports saga that doesn't play according to traditional genre rules, and an immigration tale that defies convention and expectations, *Sugar* is a bold, beautiful piece of work, so clear-eyed and honest and fantastically compelling that its quiet confidence all but knocks you out. Many of us will have reasons for feeling biased toward writer/directors Boden's and Fleck's effort - the married filmmakers' follow-up to their Oscar-nominated

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Half Nelson

from 2006 - yet you leave thinking it's a
deserved

bias;

Sugar

is, I think, the still-young movie year's finest achievement. It's also, somewhat incredibly, the
movie year's most

surprising

achievement.

For a while, though, you might think you know exactly where the film is heading. Opening in a training camp in the Dominican Republic, and focusing on the pitching upstart Miguel "Azúcar" ("Sugar") Santos, *Sugar's* first half follows the baseball-obsessed young man (played by novice actor Algenis Pérez Soto) from his home country to spring training in Arizona to his stint with Iowa's minor-league team the Bridgetown Swing - a narrative progression that's hardly devoid of clichés. Speaking only rudimentary English, Santos will, inevitably, find himself both taken aback and awed by the unfamiliar terrain - hotel mini-bars and pay-per-view porn provide early, comedic distractions - and you may feel a tickling in your gut, a foreboding, at several key moments; when Santos first flirts with the wide-eyed, devout granddaughter of his host family, or when a teammate gives him a handful of pills to handle the stress of the mound,

Sugar

would seem to be following the Triumph of the Underdog blueprint, with all of its temptations and setbacks, to a T.



Only it isn't. One of the most astonishing aspects to Boden's and Fleck's offering is its nimble ability to sidestep expectation, as the situations Santos finds himself in - with his early successes followed by eventual slumps - are presented with no artificial heightening of the drama; this baseball player's trajectory may be well-worn within the sports-movie canon, but it's kept life-sized and specific, and presented without any of the bullying force we're accustomed to. (It helps that *Sugar's* score, by Michael Brook, is so remarkably restrained.) In many ways, the movie is a universal story about the millions upon millions that have come to our country seeking the ever-elusive American Dream. But Boden and Fleck are careful to never turn Santos into a mere symbol - his travails and victories are specifically *his* - and they're alert to understated, seemingly throwaway moments of humanity that lend Santos' experiences texture and nuance: the kindness of a waitress who coaches Santos on how to order eggs; the hard-edged compassion of a team manager forced to bring in a relief pitcher.

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Tonally, the film seems just about perfect, which is especially high praise considering how many different tones are required here. From the Dominican Republic scenes, which are alive with heat and an almost tangible sense of possibility, to the rhythmically graceful ballpark sequences, Boden's and Fleck's style is almost disarmingly unobtrusive, yet there's also dazzling tension and momentum on display - sensations echoed in Pérez Soto's sublimely focused and empathetic portrayal. Boasting effortless screen charisma and a killer smile, this debuting performer ensures that all of Santos' conflicting emotions are felt through the slightest changes in expression, and his transcendently subtle turn becomes deeply affecting following *Sugar*

's third-act twist, a shocker of a storyline turn that you initially think is a random subplot, but it winds up actually

being

the plot.

It's hard to imagine this movie being more satisfying. (The only audiences who might be put off, I'm guessing, are those who would *prefer* that their sports flicks follow a tried-and-true formula, yet given the intoxicating love for baseball that permeates nearly every frame, it's doubtful that even *they* could find much to complain about.)

Gorgeously shot by cinematographer Andrij Parekh, and filled with laughs and wholly earned sentiment - its finale manages to be both heartbreaking and hugely inspiring in equal measure - *Sugar*

is a rare and wonderful thing, a celebration of America's national pastime that turns, without you quite realizing it, into a celebration of America itself.

For reviews of *Obsessed*, *The Soloist*, and *Earth*, see "[She Is... Sasha Fierce](#)."