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WRIT-312-001

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6 July 2023

Hardship in “the Happiest Place on Earth”

When you think of Disney World, what comes to mind? Most think sunshine, laughing children, Mickey Mouse headbands, Al Hoffman’s classic Magic Kingdom tune. In his humanist film, *The Florida Project*, Sean Baker–director of *Tangerine*–exposes the poverty within the outskirts of this magical theme park. Beyond this tourist attraction lies struggling low-income families who are living paycheck to paycheck to afford their motel rent. The film juxtaposes the carefree nature of rampant and chaotic Moonee (Brooklynn Kimberly Prince), a six-year-old living with her mother, Halley (Bria Vinaite). Moonee lives out her summer on her own terms: frolicking from motel to motel, creating mischief inside an abandoned house, and benevolently plotting to get free ice cream with her friends. The film portrays the innocent and unsupervised activities the motel kids share, contrasted with scenes of the adults struggling to provide for their children and sustain enough income to avoid eviction.

Mooney’s mother, Halley, is a defiant, sassy, and chronically independent character who will do anything to make ends meet. At first glance, she is comfortable living and providing for Mooney. We see her loving nature when she takes Mooney and Jancey (Valeria Cotto), Mooney’s new friend from a neighboring motel, on a hitchhiking adventure to celebrate Jancey’s birthday, acting as a mother figure for Jancey despite her clear neglect. The three give Jancey an unforgettable birthday as they sit outside and watch the fireworks over Walt Disney World, the bright joy from the tourist attraction so close they could almost touch it. Halley takes Mooney on her illegal excursions: trying to tourist-trap the Disney World patrons into buying “discounted” stolen merchandise. Mooney’s oblivion to the scheme against the magical backdrop almost romanticizes it. Following in the footsteps of her mother, Mooney’s language is–for lack of better terms–ahead of her time, making her character appear older than she is. Viewers are reminded of how young she is when she periodically breaks into tears and reveals the scars of her tainted childhood.

The Motel’s manager, Bobby (Willem Dafoe), is often seen dealing with the unruliness of his patrons and their kids. Outside the parent’s motel doors, Bobby serves as a paternal figure for the uncontrolled children. Although he appears as a crabby man whose only concern is timely rent, viewers know he has a big heart. The events of the film segue between the light-hearted lens of a six-year-old and the desperate lens of her mother. Halley starts engaging in paid-sexual acts as a means of income and violently beats her best friend, Ashley (Mela Murder), and does a terrible job at shielding Mooney from it. Mooney’s thoughts and emotions are not directly revealed; however, viewers can read her body language and episodes of vituperation as ramifications of her mother’s actions.

Despite how poverty-ridden and tainted the lives of one’s parents are, children will still be children. The symbolism and motifs in *The Florida Project* are what make it so riddling and valuable. It’s a film about childhood. The children in *The Florida Project* view the amalgamation of crime, struggle, and unhappiness through the lens of childhood, through rose-colored glasses. Again and again, Halley demonstrates her inability to mother Mooney, yet Mooney remains the same reckless, naive, and curious child.

However, Mooney’s ceaseless independence must come to an end.

As a viewer, I enjoy dramatic irony. It offers a sense of anticipation that propels me through the film. Halley’s increasingly desperate efforts and reckless behavior allude to her downfall. Mooney’s bubbly energy dims as she senses the potential for abandonment.

The direction of the film deserves its own recognition. Sean Baker’s style is raw and not afraid to capture even the unimportant and awkward details. The film is overlaid by an indie saturation that sets the tone for the unbounded summer. Vibrant clothing, bright blue skies, and colorful scenery give the film a warm feeling. The progression of the film makes sense. Baker is able to reveal large societal themes in a brief plot. The film has a conversational style that is relatable to viewers and sets a haphazard tone. Music can only be heard from a speaker, phone, headphones, or television. This style brings viewers into the action and makes it feel like we are in the same room as the characters.

*The Florida Project* is a raw and heartfelt tear-jerker. It will certainly keep you on the edge of your seat and force you to feel the emotions of the characters. The film offers a glance into the behind-the-scenes struggles that exist right outside of paradise. Viewers witness the flawed scene of Florida’s projects through Mooney’s untroubled eyes. Through her innocence, we can see the joy amongst the adversity. Though Mooney forces us to remain optimistic, we get a glance at those who drifted from the dream that Disney envisioned.