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The Florida Project (15)

dir: Sean Baker

Starring: **Bria Vinaite, Brooklynn Kimberly Prince, Willem Dafoe**

sponsors: **Sue Firth and Tony Butcher**

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Synopsis: Florida, the present. 6 year old Moonee and her mother Halley live in a motel surrounded by other low-income families. Moonee is allowed to run free with her friends Jancey and Scooty, watched over by Bobby, the motel manager. After one escapade, Jancey's mother Ashley falls out with Halley, who retaliates. Halley is stopped from hawking perfumes to visitors. She decides to become a prostitute, to earn some money. She keeps Moonee away from this. Halley steals something from a customer, who accuses her of theft. Bobby gets rid of him. Halley tries unsuccessfully to make amends with Ashley. They fight. The authorities question Halley about her parenting after a tip-off. After they attempt another scam, Halley and Moonee are visited by the police. Moonee escapes with Jancey and runs into the theme park nearby.

Truffaut, master of the child's eye view, said that his wish was to depict "children's tremendous ability to stand up to life and survive". Something of the same spirit infuses Sean Baker's impressionistic yet clear-eyed drama about a summer's antics and hard times in a run down Florida motel filled with low income families.

Head of her own gang of 'Little Rascals', precocious six-year-old Moonee (Brooklynn Prince) runs wild, largely unsupervised by her loving but rebellious mother Halley (Bria Vinaite). Both transgress cheerfully despite the exasperated interventions of the Magic Castle motel's manager Bobby (Willem Dafoe, bringing a tired, resigned kindness not seen since 1992's *Light Sleeper*). Less mother and child than co-conspirators in reckless fun, Moonee and Halley live for the moment, and on the margins, hawking wholesale perfumes to rich tourists holidaying in the neighbouring Disney Resort. These two worlds scrape up against one another sharply. Some of the film's best moments show Moonee and Halley sneaking across the boundary: scamming vast hotel buffet breakfasts, or sharing a single cupcake under a popping sky of resort fireworks.

Baker's films have long been interested in the overlooked - riding shotgun with a Chinese meal delivery man in *Take Out* (2004), a Ghanaian street hustler in *Prince of Broadway* (2008) and, most famously, transgender sex workers in *Tangerine* (2015). Here it's the hidden world of 'motel kids', where families scabble to make rent for single rooms and are forced to move out once a month to avoid establishing residency.

Shot in an observational neorealist style but with an eye for the gaudy, sherbet-coloured beauty of the setting, it's a warm,

sympathetic piece. Non-judgemental about mothering, it shows the sheer rule-breaking fun of Moonee and co's behaviour, while acknowledging its very real risks. Immersing the viewer in Moonee's view of her own 'Magic Kingdom' of motel balconies, kitschy strip malls and swampland, the narrative nimbly strings together her child-sized adventures. Like an edgier and unsentimental *Small Change* (1976), the film shows Moonee and her little band busying themselves spitting on cars, yelling insults at a topless OAP sunbather or grifting ice-creams from tourists. Baker takes his inspiration here, without incongruity, from Hal Roach's TV series *The Little Rascals*. Yet he's always conscious that unbridled play in public spaces is marked out nowadays as antisocial rather than mischievous. The texture of the children's days is captured in fine, close-up detail - harrumphing at adult chivvying, the delight of rain on skin, finding cows in a field ('I took you on a safari!'). Sliced into it is their gruff guardian Bobby's thankless daily round, dealing with everything from bed bugs to a child predator.

If Baker's 'slow cinema' approach gives a welcome depth, it also makes for an episodic, slightly soggy middle section. In contrast to *Tangerine's* revenge-plot momentum, it dawdles, albeit absorbingly. So when the story pivots to Halley's spiral into sex work, there is a much-needed hit of drama. Especially since, like *Fish Tank* (2009) and *American Honey* (2016), the script (co-written by Baker and longtime collaborator Chris Bergoch), refrains from moralising, concentrating instead on the rushing highs and lows of Halley's jaunts and fights, the sting as her closest friendship collapses rancorously.

Transmitting a rebellious energy into the scenes, first time actress Vinaite crackles. Yet her raucous, one-note style can't adapt to tender, more nuanced scenes with Moonee. Besides Halley's immature rages, Prince's Moonee conveys a smart-mouthed, take charge precocity that seems adult beyond her years; "I always know when grown-ups are about to cry," she remarks sagely. Watching her racked with misery at a key point, you are almost surprised to see her vulnerable, out of fixes. Veteran actor Dafoe blends in seamlessly with the sharp naturalism of the film's first-time performers, his understated Bobby torn between chastising chaotic families and bailing them out.

Around them, Baker and cinematographer Alexis Zabe wrap 35-mm widescreen landscapes of considerable beauty; a sudden spread of twilight balcony lights or a melting sunset turning the candy coloured motel into a hardscrabble Wonderland. Even when Moonee's gang accidentally torch and abandoned condo, their play

in white wafts of insulation (“Ghost poop!”) has a child's delight in every-day enchantments. This may also be what's responsible for the film's single sizeable misjudgment: a late-on swerve into wishful fancy.

Nevertheless, it's the film's sympathetic eye that ensures that it doesn't exoticize the family's plight, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* style, or dip into poverty porn. Drunken brawls, pissed-off johns and vicious catfights are simply day-to-day eruptions here, blowing in and out of the motel like the Florida weather. Full of compassion and curiosity about its characters' fragile lives, this memorable drama establishes Baker as among cinema's most original chroniclers of childhood.

Credits

Bobby	Willem Dafoe
Moonee	Brooklynn Kimberly Prince
Halley	Bria Vinaite
Jancey	Valerie Cotto
Scooty	Christopher Rivera
Jack	Caleb Landry Jones
Director	Sean Baker
Screenplay	Sean Baker, Chris Bergoch
Director of Photography	Alexis Zabe
Editor	Sean Baker
Production design	Stephonik Youth
Sound mix	Mark Weber
Costume	Fernando Rodriguez
	USA 2017. 111 mins

Another View

For the hair-raising opening scene of Sean Baker's astonishing neo-realist fable, *The Florida Project*, three overstimulated toddlers – Moonee (Brooklynn Prince) Scooty (Christopher Rivera) and Dicky (Aiden Malik) – dash with arms ailing from The Magic Kingdom to Future Land. Though they are nestled deep in Disney country, their situation is far from enchanted, as these locations are in fact opportunist motel blocks named in order to lure holidaying saps into their grimy net. Hard cut to Kool and the Gang's 'Celebration' for the opening credits, and we're all set to go.

Even though the world of this film consists of outstretched carparks, giant dumpsters, novelty fast food concessions and scads of overgrown scrubland, Baker constantly assures that there is always a dash of fairy dust in the air if you know where to look for it. He carries over the raucous spirit of his previous iPhone opus, *Tangerine*, and then boldly notches things up a level for this new one. It feels like his most epic and profoundly affecting film to date. And it's not that it looks expensive or that the story is broader in scope than usual. More that it offers a trenchant and compassionate political statement about the condition of working class America without once resorting to bald point making or cliché.

Bria Vinaite is a major new discovery as tatted-up single mom Halley, a woman-on-the-verge who suppresses all fear and takes care of business when she has to in order to raise her wisecracking lil' terror, Moonee. She charges towards life and doesn't care about what others think of her, even though she doesn't really abide by any traditional standards of motherhood. The film is about how this duo are able to keep their head bobbing above the poverty line, but it's also about how Halley allows her daughter to exist in a world of make-believe, knowing that the crushing reality of their circumstances might sap away her infectious joie de vivre. That sense of unalloyed freedom might be the one thing keeping the tiny firecracker aflame.

Then, playing the wise old sage who tries to keep crazy Halley under his wing (and out of jail), is a magnificent Willem Dafoe as doormat motel manager Bobby, a harried man who is just about able to keep his rowdy tenants in check. And that is pretty much that. The film

follows the kids on their daily adventures to surrounding lots and allows us to giggle at their monkeyshines. It's a celebration of innocence and energy, but it also never once makes out The Magic Kingdom to be an off-ramp hellhole full of life's unfortunate dregs. This film pulses with empathy – Baker loves these places, and for more than reasons of high kitsch.

Laughter and sadness co-mingle until a euphoric finale scene sends the story into the realms of pure candy-coated fantasy. It's a breathtaking vision of fighting spirit and how the modern American underclass take any action available (legal or otherwise) for the purposes of self-betterment. Cinematographer Alex Zabe bathes the landscape in misty peach hues and laces it with never-ending rainbows. And what more is there to say? You must see this beautiful, vibrant, heartfelt and hilarious movie as soon as you damn well can, bi-yatch.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday, February 1st, 7.30pm Custody (France 2016. Cert 15)

In his debut feature, Xavier Legrand - expanding a short film he made in 2013, with the same actors - creates what he describes as a modern Greek tragedy, rooted in the home, where “blood ties are so important.” Antoine and Miriam are divorced. As they try to reach agreement on the issue of custody of and access to the children, especially 12 year old Julien (brilliantly played by Thomas Gloria), the acrimonious nature of their relationship is gradually revealed and the tussle over who has which rights escalates from messy domestic drama to full-on suspense thriller, with the outcome in doubt right to the very end.

Programme information

The film chosen to fill the final new release slot of the season (on April 19th), is Kore-eda Hirokazu's Oscar nominated and Palme d'Or winner, *Shoplifters*.