Blu-ray Review: ‘Being Flynn’ Can’t Capture Spirit of Nick Flynn’s Fine Memoir

Submitted by mattmovieman [1] on July 18, 2012 - 9:27am

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CHICAGO – A decade ago, director Paul Weitz made a wonderful film about the unusual friendship that developed between an aging loner and a fatherless youth preoccupied with the well-being of his suicidal mother. The picture was 2002’s “About a Boy,” and it featured Hugh Grant in a performance sorely deserving of an Oscar nomination.

In some ways, “Being Flynn” has the same story to tell, but it’s told in a minor key. It lacks the sharp wit of Weitz’s earlier picture, and it mutes the humorous nuances of its source material, Nick Flynn’s beloved memoir, “Another Bulls—t Night in Suck City.” Too bad Weitz couldn’t use Flynn’s original title. It may be profane, but it’s vastly preferable to the generic “Being Flynn.” Yet the new title is indicative of this film’s utter lack of personality. It spins a sad tale reasonably well, but fails to get us involved in its hero’s journey.



Blu-ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

The hero, of course, is jaded twentysomething, Nick Flynn (Paul Dano), though the film makes some feeble attempts at intertwining his thoughts with those of his estranged father, a con-man and would-be poet named Jonathan (Robert De Niro). It’s clear from the get-go that Jonathan’s confidence is as unflagging as his delusions. His opening voice-over boasts that everything he writes is a masterpiece, though his body of work remains unseen. Eighteen years ago, Jonathan abandoned his family, leaving his wife, Jody (Julianne Moore), to care for their son. It’s unclear what drove Jody to suicide, and though that may be the point, it’s still frustrating to see a great actress like Moore tackle such an underdeveloped role. Still reeling from his mother’s death, Nick gets a job at a local homeless shelter, and is surprised to see his father in the line of new residents. De Niro has never looked more weathered and subtly deranged, and the actor is effortlessly convincing. Dano, however, seems adrift in his role, and ends up utilizing an excess of gaped mouth expressions. Even in the very last shot, it’s difficult to determine how Nick feels toward his father. It often seems as if Dano and De Niro are acting in two separate pictures, and though the void that exists between them is rather appropriate, it causes the film to become dramatically inert at several crucial moments.



Being Flynn was released on Blu-ray and DVD on July 10, 2012.
Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

Regardless of its demerits, there is still plenty here worth recommending. Weitz and his cinematographer Declan Quinn (“Leaving Las Vegas”) create haunting imagery that’s elegant in its simplicity. During a game of catch, the camera pans back and forth as young Nick throws the ball to various paternal stand-ins that populated his life. There’s also an oddly beautiful shot of Jonathan warming himself by resting on a grate, as the camera rises to a God’s-eye perspective. Nick narrates this scene, and often seems to be present in Jonathan’s life even when he’s absent. Since he’s always viewing his father’s life from a God’s-eye perspective, it halts the audience from experiencing the world through Jonathan’s eyes, which is a shame considering he’s a much more interesting character. What possessed him to be a con man? Why is he prejudiced against “blacks and gays”? Why does he wheel around Brooklyn in his taxi, ranting about the urban cesspool like a geriatric Travis Bickle? De Niro is so good in his scenes that one wishes the film were about him. As played by Dano, Nick comes off as sullen and oddly amused, though the actor appears more comfortable in his scenes with Olivia Thirlby, who’s quite touching as the young woman who senses trouble in Nick’s life, and offers him a lifejacket before bailing. The ensemble is peppered with small but sublime cameos from Wes Studi, William Sadler and Flynn’s wife, Lily Taylor.

“Being Flynn” is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.40:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish audio tracks, and includes a pocket BLU app. The sole bonus feature is a disappointingly brief making-of featurette where Flynn reveals (some of) the film’s autobiographical content. Dano was surprised to learn that Flynn lived only a few blocks away from his Brooklyn home, which allowed them to meet frequently. A conversation between Dano and Flynn would’ve been a most interesting extra.

‘Being Flynn’ is released by Universal Studios Home Entertainment and stars Paul Dano, Robert De Niro, Olivia Thirlby, Julianne Moore, Lili Taylor and Wes Studi. It was written and directed by Paul Weitz. It was released on July 10, 2012. It is rated R.

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