

## Blu-ray Review: Disingenuous ‘Won’t Back Down’ Oversimplifies Vital Issues

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on January 24, 2013 - 10:36am

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CHICAGO – If a film were meant to be judged purely on the basis of its final shot, then Daniel Barnz’s “Won’t Back Down” would be an unqualified success. The image of a little girl finally learning to pronounce the word “hope” could’ve easily been a cheesy contrivance straight out of a Feldco commercial. Even on paper, the shot sounds downright silly.

The fact that it works so well is a testament to the strength of Roman Osin’s cinematography (which visually brings the picture full circle), the tender performance by Emily Alyn Lind (of “Enter the Void” fame) and editor Kristina Boden’s impeccably timed cut to black. Indeed, the shot is a small triumph, but it is regrettably preceded by a great many other shots that don’t work at all.



Blu-ray Rating: **2.0/5.0**

This picture was a critical and financial flop that likely was further damaged by impassioned protests from the American Federation of Teachers. It was distributed by Walden Media, a company best known for distributing family fare like the highly profitable “Narnia” series. Yet the Walden release that shares the most in common with “Won’t Back Down” is Davis Guggenheim’s 2010 documentary and snubbed Oscar hopeful, “Waiting for Superman,” which presented a complex argument for why unions limit the potential of public education, and why charter schools provide a healthy alternative. Regardless of one’s opinion regarding these controversial issues, there’s no denying the power of Guggenheim’s craftsmanship. In contrast, “Won’t Back Down” is shoddy air-brushed wish-fulfillment masquerading as a timely drama. It portrays teacher’s unions as pure evil while freely ignoring the other factors that contribute to a failing school—poverty, neglectful parenting, corporate corruption, etc. The “actual events” that allegedly served as the film’s inspiration are the failed attempts made by concerned parents to change their children’s struggling school with the use of a legal maneuver known as the “parent trigger.” The hurdles facing these parents were ludicrously difficult, but in Hollywood’s typically trite fashion, the heroines of “Won’t Back Down” have little trouble securing their victory before the final fade out.



Won't Back Down was released on Blu-ray and DVD on January 15th, 2013.

Photo credit: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

As a stubbornly hopeful single mom, Maggie Gyllenhaal delivers more or less the exact same performance she gave in Tanya Wexler's equally formulaic yet infinitely more entertaining comedy, "Hysteria." She's plucky and confident to a fault, as she raises her daughter's hopes that she'll somehow manage to win a lottery where the odds are massively stacked against her. Like Maya in "Zero Dark Thirty," Gyllenhaal is "100 percent" convinced that her impossible dream will come true. Yet unlike "Zero Dark Thirty," which does a remarkable job of refraining to tell audiences how to feel about the information it presents, "Won't Back Down" turns every confrontation into a cartoonish death match between good and evil. It's appalling to watch an actress as observant and richly complex as Viola Davis waste her skills on such subpar material. In the thankless role of the teacher who teams up with Gyllenhaal, Davis is the film's sole substantial emotional anchor. That's too much pressure to put on a single person, however extraordinary their abilities, though Davis does manage to elevate the film from its destined status as a complete disaster. Instead, it's a complete disappointment.

"Won't Back Down" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, Spanish and French audio tracks, and is available in a Blu-ray/UltraViolet combo pack. In a couple insultingly glib featurettes, the cast and crew reflect on their cherished memories of inspirational teachers, as if that will somehow make up for the film's trashing of unions (a word that is conspicuously avoided in the extras). Barnz's audio commentary track draws attention to Osin's ever-moving camera, which was meant to capture the restless, relentless spirit of the protagonists' crusade in several long takes, often requiring the actors to jog alongside the lens. In one amusing tidbit, Barnz confesses to hearing a vaguely peeved Davis grumble, "All I do in this movie is walk fast!" Too bad she didn't walk off the set.

'Won't Back Down' is released by Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment and stars Maggie Gyllenhaal, Viola Davis, Oscar Isaac, Holly Hunter, Rosie Perez, Emily Alyn Lind, Dante Brown and Lance Reddick. It was written by Brin Hill and Daniel Barnz and directed by Daniel Barnz. It was released on January 15th, 2013. It is rated PG.



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