

Paul Giamatti, Amy Ryan Rock in Fantastic ‘Win Win’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 25, 2011 - 1:44pm

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Writer/Director Thomas McCarthy makes films with that very unique attribute in which the characters completely feel like they exist before the opening scene and after the credits roll. As he did in “The Station Agent” and “The Visitor,” he has told another unique story that is both moving and also believable at the same time, an increasingly-rare combination. “Win Win” is the first great film of 2011.

Like a lot of people, Mike (Paul Giamatti) is struggling to keep his business together. With rising bills, pending expenses, and fewer clients, he worries about losing the financial backbone of his family (including two daughters and his wife Jackie, played beautifully by Amy Ryan) and he sees an opportunity in Leo (Burt Young), an older gentleman on the edge of dementia. Mike agrees to take care of Leo to collect a sizable stipend and this questionable act introduces him to his grandson Kyle (Alex Shaffer), who shows up on Leo’s front step when he runs away from home. With hints at an abusive home life and a mother who doesn’t seem to care that he’s missing, Mike and Jackie decide to take care of Kyle until further notice.

Believe it or not, “Win Win” is also a sports movie. Mike coaches a pretty awful wrestling team at the local high school and serendipity kicks in when he figures out that Kyle is a world-class athlete. With the help of his friend Terry (Bobby Cannavale), Mike adds Kyle to the team, although they really don’t need to do much more than cheer him on. The boys jokingly have a move called “whatever the f**k it takes,” in which they summon all the strength they have left to not get pinned. The metaphor for doing the same in life to keep your family and business together is clear but not overly underlined.



Win Win

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

“Win Win” is a very funny movie, but, of course, McCarthy’s story will go some pretty dramatic places as well. Kyle’s mother (Melanie Lynskey) eventually plays a role and secrets are revealed, but McCarthy moves the drama along believably and without cliché. The plot for “Win Win” — struggling businessman finds success in the wrestling ring with a runaway kid — could have been the basis for a horrendous Disney movie of the week, filled with manipulative moments and life lessons. “Win Win” is almost more remarkable for what’s it not than what it is. It’s not heartstring-pulling, merely moving. It’s not clichéd. It’s not overly familiar. Writing this good is as impressive for the pitfalls it avoids as for the fact that it’s much harder to pull off than it looks.

McCarthy’s script deserves copious praise, but it doesn’t work without the best ensemble of the year to date. The great Paul Giamatti and Amy Ryan ground the entire piece in a believability that’s absolutely essential for the success of the piece. Mike does something in “Win Win” that’s not entirely likable but we believe it and go with it because Giamatti and Ryan feel like a genuine suburban couple. They bring a lived-in quality to the roles, not unlike what Patricia Clarkson brought to “Station Agent” or Oscar nominee Richard Jenkins brought to “The Visitor.” I can’t say enough about the subtle, excellent work both actors do here. It will surely be underrated.



Win Win

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

While Giamatti and Ryan shine brightest, credit should go to the entire ensemble, including newcomer Alex Shaffer, a young man who conveys a deep well of emotion created by a dark past but doesn't overplay it. Jeffrey Tambor, Margo Martindale, Bobby Cannavale — none of them hit a false note.

As someone who sees hundreds of movies a year, I find myself increasingly drawn to the rare ones that can be both genuine and moving at the same time. Like “The Visitor,” “Win Win” hits emotional chords by feeling real instead of by manipulating viewer emotions. We like Mike & Jackie. We root for Kyle. We want to know what’s going to happen to these people because we feel like we know them or, in some cases, are them.

There are very few movies a year that I honestly feel would work enough to recommend, even if it’s a small step down from my gushing praise, to everyone who sees them, regardless of demographic (and please ignore the MPAA’s stupid rating for this movie, which is totally appropriate for anyone over 10). “Win Win” is such a movie.

“Win Win” stars Paul Giamatti, Amy Ryan, Bobby Cannavale, Jeffrey Tambor, Burt Young, Margo Martindale, and Alex Shaffer. It was written and directed by Thomas McCarthy. It is rated R and was released on in Chicago on March 25th, 2011.



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