

‘Won’t Back Down’ is an Agenda Disguised as a Film

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 28, 2012 - 3:50pm

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There is an interesting trend in the financing of films, actual partisan organizations are fostering their points-of-view through the movies. This is nothing new in documentaries, but now it appears in a fictional film called “Won’t Back Down,” featuring Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis.

Walden Media partially funded the film, and they are part of the Anschutz Film Group, owned by a conservative activist named Phillip Anschutz. His goal is public school reform, and in doing so also is taking on the teacher’s unions, who are blamed in part for the poor performance of the fictional Pittsburgh school in the film. Cranky Phil might have started with a decent or even plausible script, because everything presented in “Won’t Back Down” severely tests reality. If Anschutz wants the audience on his side, make a better movie.

Jamie Fitzpatrick (Maggie Gyllenhaal) is a lower income, single mother trapped in a Pittsburgh school district that won’t give her dyslexic daughter (Emily Alyn Lind) a decent education. In the mother’s desperation to help her progeny, she turns to another teacher named Nona Alberts (Viola Davis) who has family issues of her own, and pleads with her to take advantage of a Pennsylvania law that allows a parental takeover of a failing school.



Jamie (Maggie Gyllenhaal), Ms. Harper (Rosie Perez) and Nona (Viola Davis) in ‘Won’t Back Down’
Photo credit: Kelly Hayes for Walden Media

Despite two jobs, the plucky single mother knocks on doors and rallies teachers, including Ms. Harper (Rosie Perez) and hunky Mr. Perry (Oscar Isaac). In the midst of trying to convince a school district to make change, the teacher's union rallies against Jamie and Nona, publishing propaganda and worrying insiders like Evelyn Riske (Holly Hunter). Bureaucracy has nothing against a determined single mother, so this failing school may stand a chance to redeem itself.

This is all familiar territory for the movies – the single voice starting a ripple of change – but here it's reduce to puddles through a series of stops and starts, that is as annoying as the presence of Gyllenhaal's overplayed single mom. It's like the old Mel Brooks routine with the bellboy taking the bags. "I've got it, I've got it, I've got it...I don't got it." That's how drama is injected into the predictable-as-the-sun-coming-up story, because in presenting a plucky single mom, she isn't expected to lose, is she? The fact also that there is a specific agenda for creating the weak premise doesn't help in navigating the story.

How does this partisanship present itself? Well, Ving Rhames plays the principal of a glorious charter school that everyone wants to get into, and makes a speech that sounds like a powerpoint presentation for the Walden Media philosophy. The teachers union representatives are either cynical bureaucrats or educators beyond burn out. The thankless acting task of the union burnout was given to actor Nancy Bach, and she's so lacking humanity that they should have recruited an android to play the role. And in case we didn't get it, there is a quick cut to her in teacher's union regalia during the conclusion.

Viola Davis is a wonderful actor, as evidenced in her Oscar nominated performance in last year's "The Help," and she really tries to make hay out of this soapy and choppy script. Actually most of the actors are sincere, leaving out Gyllenhaal because she chose the chippy route, but the material is far below the effort they are giving. Were they aware of the film's agenda, or were they just signing up for what they thought was a bizarro world version of "Norma Rae"?



Jamie and Nona Celebrate in 'Won't Back Down'
Photo credit: Kelly Hayes for Universal Pictures

Holly Hunter as Evelyn Riske has one of the oddest roles in the film. She represents the old timey great days of the unions, with all of her relatives apparently weeping at the meeting hall, according to her character. As the evil of the new-age teacher's union becomes evident to her, she becomes the convert, she has seen the Phillip Anschutz light! The Oscar winner has fallen on harder times, as an aging actress trying to infiltrate a show business system in which all the best older woman character parts go to Meryl Streep. Hopefully, Hunter gets another shot at a great role, because she certainly is better than this movie.

There is a quick shot of the new school in action at the end, with an array of marvelous decorations and school sayings on the wall. Jamie's daughter, she of the dyslexic handicap, is marched to stage to read an announcement. Like the loaves and the fishes, expect a miracle.

"Won't Back Down" opens everywhere September 28th. Featuring Maggie Gyllenhaal, Viola Davis, Holly Hunter, Ving Rhames, Emily Alyn Lind, Rosie Perez, Oscar Isaac and Nancy Bach. Screenplay by Brin Hill and Daniel Bartz. Directed by Daniel Bartz. Rated "PG"



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