

For a Real Summer Movie, Go ‘The Way, Way Back’

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CHICAGO – Nothing evokes the time, sights and smells of summer like the getaway resort. The long days, the mystery of night, the first crush and the summer job are all brought back in the soapy yet fun “The Way, Way Back,” featuring Steve Carell, Sam Rockwell and Allison Janney.

What makes this film work is the victory of a 15 year old boy to find what makes him courageous, through a potential stepfather, a timid mother and a surrogate mentor at a water park. “The Way, Way Back” also contains a bit of previous generation nostalgia, as the title refers to that little fold up seat in a station wagon that faces the traffic in back – which most big families had. The first crush is beautifully represented as well, through a perfectly cast young actress and the situation of her problems. This is a sit-back-and-enjoy story with its share of heartache, parties and sand between the toes, the very definition that makes the summer come alive.

Duncan (Liam James) is the 15 year old protagonist, who is being dragged to a oceanside summer resort by his mother Pam (Toni Collette) and her boyfriend Trent (Steve Carell). While sitting in the “way, way back,” Duncan has to listen to a lecture belittling him by the rather odious Trent, and his dislike for his mother’s beau is about to boil over as they reach the resort.



The summer neighbors are Betty (Allison Janney), Kip (Robb Corddry) and his wife Joan (Amanda Peet). Susanna (AnnaSophia Robb) is the

daughter of Betty, and the object of Duncan's teenage crush. But first he is bored, and attaches himself – job included – to a rundown local water park. This contains his new mentor Owen (Sam Rockwell), and a gang of workers who will recharge his summer, including Caitlyn (Maya Rudolph), Lewis (Jim Rash) and Roddy (Nat Faxon).

Rash and Faxon are the writer/directors of this bittersweet film, done much in the spirit of their Oscar winning screenplay for "The Descendants." This is an original story, unlike their previous adaptation from a novel, and it's meant to corral the spirit of summer, with both the joys and sorrows. There are two communities that Duncan splits his time between – the darkness of the step boyfriend, his mother and the neighbors, or the light of the hang-loose water park manager Owen and his gang of worker freaks.

The darkness is fairly gloomy. Mother Pam is very insecure about her relationship, and allows for the bad behavior of Trent. Steve Carell plays against his affable type in this role, and never compromises on the character's negative energy. Carell is definitely trading in his success in the industry for more challenging roles, and does a good job of keeping the character fairly unlikable. Even in his conclusive "comeuppance" in the film, there is an indication that he's not likely to change.

The light of the water park is a summer movie fantasyland. It allows Duncan to find his identity, with the wise but hippie-like Owen leading the way. In the movie universe, Owen is the type of character that seeks redemption through his new friendship with Duncan, seemingly waiting around for a 15-year old to mentor. There is an unreal sense about this, but it is a fictional film and not a documentary about a 40 something man remaining aimless and rejecting responsibility, while lightening the load of an errant adolescent.



Pam (Toni Collette) and Trent (Steve Carell) in 'The Way, Way Back'
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Another element of fun is the supporting characters. Although Allison Janney is a unrepentant drunk and terrible mother, her interpretation of the character is fascinating. Robb Corddry, Amanda Peet, Maya Rudolph and even creators Jim Rash and Nat Faxon portray background characters that are memorable, and the perfect casting of AnnaSophia Robb as the "summer crush" maintains the narrative goal of evoking both a modern and nostalgic summer story.

It's the type of movie where you can smell the ocean, taste the cocktails and remember the feelings of darkness and light, brought together in three short months every year, the summers of now and also way way back.

"The Way, Way Back" opens everywhere on July 5th. Featuring Sam Rockwell, Steve Carell, Toni Collette, Maya Rudolph, Amanda Peet, Allison Janney, Jim Rash and Nat Faxon. Written and directed by Jim Rash and Nat Faxon. Rated "PG-13"



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