

Riveting 'The Spectacular Now' Finds Rare Truth in Young Characters

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 8, 2013 - 10:34am

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sundance hit (and Chicago Critics Film Festival Closing Night film) “The Spectacular Now” finally opens in Chicago tomorrow, August 9, 2013 and the film’s already-impressive legion of fans is only going to grow as this stunning achievement hits more markets around the country. Touching, funny, romantic, and so remarkably real, James Ponsoldt’s teen drama captures a truth about our formative years that so many other similar films fail to come close to grasping. It has earned comparisons to Cameron Crowe’s work, most notably “Say Anything...,” and unlike most of the occasions when critics use an old film instead of saying something about the new one, this one rings true. I missed the film at Sundance but saw at CCFF in April. I haven’t seen a better film since.

We all knew Sutter (Miles Teller) in high school (as the saying goes, if you didn’t know him, you probably *were* him). Sutter is that incredibly popular kid with a social skill set that makes him king of adolescence but doesn’t exactly push him to becoming a successful adult. He drinks to the point of passing out far too often and can’t maintain a relationship with the beautiful and popular Cassidy (Brie Larson). The kid who’s too cool for the room and always slightly drunk may be the one that we’re drawn to in adolescence but he gets a lot less interesting in college and becomes the town drunk by the time he’s an adult. That guy you see at the bar in the middle of the day? He was probably as popular as Sutter in high school.



The Spectacular Now

Photo credit: A24

What’s notable about Sutter’s arc in “The Spectacular Now” is that this fully-realized character is given a mirror in which to check himself through an unlikely romance with an intellectual, unpopular girl named Aimee (Shailene Woodley). When Sutter wakes up on Aimee’s lawn, he joins her in her morning paper route and a connection is made. What does Sutter see in Aimee, the girl that most of his friends won’t talk

to? What does Aimee see in this abrasive jerk? That's up for you to decide. She softens his edges and he seems to give her a little bit of confidence but it's not your typical, starry-eyed Young Adult romance. As graduation day nears, Sutter begins to dig deeper into his own personality flaws, even tracking down his father, a scene-stealing Kyle Chandler. There's a moment between Teller, Woodley, and Chandler late in the film that is breathtaking in its heartbreak.

The amazing script by Scott Neustadter & Michael H. Weber (from a novel by Tim Tharp) works on a number of levels but they all come back to the fact that this film never treats its young adults like plot devices. Sutter & Aimee are real. They are not born from a focus group trying to determine how to make the most money from an adolescent audience but from reality. There's an amazing, extended dialogue scene between Sutter & Aimee on a walk at a party and it's thrilling not because of forced action but because of the honesty of the dialogue between two fully-realized characters.



The Spectacular Now

Photo credit: A24

Of course, those characters don't work without two incredible actors to portray them. Shailene Woodley proves that the acclaim she garnered for "The Descendants" was no fluke, giving a charming performance, but the film belongs to Miles Teller. Consider what this young actor doesn't do when you watch it. He doesn't give in to the stereotypes around teen alcoholism. He doesn't play Sutter as too cool for the room. As all teens do, he behaves differently around his friends than with his mom (Jennifer Jason Leigh). And the cautious, almost scared way in which Teller approaches the scenes with Sutter's father make it clear that this is a smart, incredibly talented actor. It's one of my favorite performances of the year.

Director James Ponsoldt makes the decision to treat his characters with respect. His film doesn't feel rushed like so many teen romances. We get to know Sutter, Aimee, and their world. And so when we're there with them in the key emotional moments in the final act, moments that these characters will remember their entire lives, the truth of it is palpable. We feel their pain and joy in ways that so many other filmmakers ignore the minute they stop taking their characters seriously. "The Spectacular Now" is a film that you should take very, very seriously.

"The Spectacular Now" stars Miles Teller, Shailene Woodley, and Brie Larson. It was written by Scott Neustadter & Michael H. Weber and directed by James Ponsoldt. It opens in Chicago on August 9, 2013, and is now playing in some markets.



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