Lauren Ambrose Shines in Heartbreaking Indie ‘About Sunny’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – In the annals of bad parenting portrayed on film, the heroine of Bryan Wizemann’s 2011 indie drama is a special case indeed. Though we watch helplessly as she makes countless bad decisions guaranteed to send her young daughter to intensive therapy, we don’t regard her as a sinister figure on the order of Monique’s monstrous matriarch in “Precious.” Our gaze is one of empathy.

That’s because Wizemann’s film is remarkably observant in its exploration of the factors that led this single mother, Angela, to commit such desperate acts. She embodies the anxiety and rage of a working class that feels utterly abandoned by its own country. It’s difficult to be a nurturing parent when you’re living from paycheck to paycheck while struggling to keep your head above water in a society consistently at odds with your needs. Yet instead of transforming the tale into a political polemic, Wizemann allows the outrage to emerge organically from the dire situations that his tragic duo find themselves trapped within.

Of course, a picture this sad and uncompromising with prove to be a tough sit for many viewers, and there are times when Angela’s misguided behavior verges on infuriating. Yet what keeps the viewer anchored throughout is the powerhouse performance by Lauren Ambrose (of “Six Feet Under” fame) as Angela. It’s difficult to think of another actress who could’ve pulled off this role so well. She earns our sympathy without softening any of her character’s rough edges. In many ways, she’s no less unsuitable for motherhood than Tilda Swinton’s wayward criminal in “Julia.” It’s clear from the get-go that Angela’s pint-sized daughter, Sunny (Audrey P. Scott), is the more clear-headed, perceptive and (let’s face it) adult of the two. She doesn’t dispel precocious wisdom like some hideous Hollywood caricature, but she is able to maintain her cool in crises that nearly cause her mother’s sanity to cave in. Whereas Angela’s frenzied mind is often clouded with irrationality, Sunny can often see straight to the heart of things. During the many tirades in which Angela projects her own self-loathing onto her daughter, Sunny maintains a stiff upper lip despite her agony. One gets the idea that Sunny will somehow manage to survive her circumstances and grow into the sort of woman Angela could never become.



Lauren Ambrose stars in Bryan Wizemann’s About Sunny.
Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

Perhaps it’s to the credit of Wizemann’s script that the audience remains uncertain of precisely what conclusion they desire to see for these characters. On one hand, Angela is an appallingly inept guardian who freely allows her kid to roam about unaccompanied, freely risking her abduction at any given moment. She also acts far too often on impulse, arriving at disastrous conclusions without adequately weighing the odds. And yet, Ambrose does an excellent job of ensuring that the audience is never in doubt that Angela is still trying her hardest, fighting against the bleakness that threatens to engulf her. Even when she’s at her worst, Angela is arguably preferable to the two creeps intent on claiming Sunny for themselves.

One of the film’s major missteps is the casting of Dylan Baker in the key role of Angela’s seemingly compassionate co-worker, Max. Baker is a major talent, yet he has the misfortune of being typecast as unsavory lowlives (who can forget his galvanizing performance as the pedophile in Todd Solondz’s “Happiness”?). From the instant Max offers to photograph Sunny and delivers the line, “Hey there, cutie,” while projecting an ominously stony expression, it’s clear that no sane parent would allow their kid within a thousand miles of this guy. And yet, Angela, once again, is the exception.

Baker’s performance is so deeply unsettling that it hints at an entirely different picture altogether. It also distracts from the central conflict of the film, which is Angela’s indecision over what constitutes as her child’s best interest. Every time Sunny attempts to read even the simplest of phrases, it’s clear that her dyslexia needs the attention that her mother simply can’t afford. Enter Louise (Penelope Ann Miller), Max’s sister that he boldly invites to Sunny’s birthday party. Louise takes an instant interest in Sunny, yet her predatory demeanor betrays the sweetness of her words. She insists that she only wants to help Angela in providing Sunny with the care that she needs, but there’s a patronizing air to her every move that suggests her aim is to take advantage of an unfortunate soul for her own gain. That suspicion is confirmed in the heartbreaking final scenes where the fate of a child is reduced to the shady maneuvers of a drug deal.



Lauren Ambrose and Dylan Baker star in Bryan Wizemann’s About Sunny.
Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

What are viewers meant to take from a picture like “About Sunny”? It provides no answers for the questions it raises and asks us to identify with characters hopelessly stunted in their growth. And yet, the film ultimately proves to be an enormously rewarding one, in that it forces us to see past Angela’s faults and regard the wounded humanity beneath. It’s so easy to sit back and judge one’s actions. It enables us to view others from a canted angle that shields us from any reflection of ourselves. Films like “About Sunny” shatter this sort of willful ignorance, and for that, we should be grateful.

‘About Sunny’ stars Lauren Ambrose, Audrey P. Scott, Dylan Baker and Penelope Ann Miller. It was written and directed by Bryan Wizemann. It was released May 24th at Facets. It is not rated.


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By MATT FAGERHOLM [10]
Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
matt@hollywoodchicago.com [9]

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