Awkward & Difficult is Played Out in ‘Eighth Grade’

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on July 22, 2018 - 3:22pm

- A24 [2]
- Adolescence [3]
- Bo Burnham [4]
- EIghth Grade [5]
- Elsie Fisher [6]
- Emily Robinson [7]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [8]
- Jake Ryan [9]
- Josh Hamilton [10]
- Luke Prael [11]
- Movie Review [12]
- Patrick McDonald [13]
- Sex [14]
- Social Media [15]
- YouTube [16]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – We’ve all been there. Depending on what school structure you lived through, everyone had issues in “Eighth Grade.” Writer/director Bo Burnham puts those universal issues in a modern context (social media, online video), and portrays them through a girl struggling to belong while navigating the choppy waters of adolescence. It’s difficult, awkward and representative.

Luckily Burnham found an extraordinary actor to interpret his story. Elsie Fisher is connected to her character not just by age, but by an instinctive vulnerability that bubbles to the surface in her portrayal. In eighth grade reality, a couple of situations are going on. One is the plateau in the education system, the upper echelon in a grade school/middle school structure, and the second is dealing with those pesky teenage hormones that drives everybody crazy. Those two scenarios clash profoundly in Burnham’s story, so much so that in rooting for Elsie’s character to have any victory, memories are inevitable on how difficult those victories were to attain. Because of these reactions, “Eighth Grade” is universally felt and still modern in context.

Kayla (Elsie Fisher) is in her final week of Eighth Grade, but is struggling to connect to the changes her classmates are going through in adolescence right before high school. She comes off as awkward and shy outwardly, but at the same time posts a number of YouTube videos on how to be confident. Her single father (Josh Hamilton) cannot reach her, as she spirals downward in self esteem.



Kayla’s (Elsie Fisher) Reflects in Front of Her Screen in ‘Eighth Grade’
Photo credit: A24

She has a crush on Aiden (Luke Prael) and tries to engage him by pretending to like what he likes (nude pictures via text), but ignores signals from Gabe (Jake Ryan), a fellow awkward traveler. At the same time, she begins a friendship with Olivia (Emily Robinson) which gets her into another difficult entanglement. She is going in a crazy direction, and slowly begins to understand what is right for her.

I couldn’t help but think that as Elsie Fisher was acting out all the rituals of difficulties that came with this story, that she probably was living them in reality at the same time. Her performance is raw truth in dealing with modern social media, her own survival instincts and the daily onslaught of slights that transitioning teenagers have to deal with in all eras. Her persona is heart-breaking and real at the same time, and her outsider status is so relatable – especially, I presume, with women – that every person who experiences this film will most likely reflect on their own eighth grade times.

Burnham’s script was unafraid to go to certain places, especially when it came to access to digital-age information and expectations for teen sexuality. As a middle aged man with no children, I can only follow hearsay about the “shocking” rituals of mating in high school today. Kayla’s father Mark is a dedicated parent (there is an implication in the story that the mother in the equation caused a rift in the family, which they both still felt) but he cannot monitor her 24/7 and expect her to make her own transitions. Hamilton’s portrayal is nicely balanced between parental concern and a desire to feed his daughter’s natural life paths.



Everything is Awkward: Kayla and Her Dad (Josh Hamilton) in ‘Eighth Grade’
Photo credit: A24

Those paths include her slightly strange and poignant “confidence” videos on YouTube. Again, it’s hard to imagine having such a forum in an emerging teen’s hands, but there it is and it exists at a very deep level. Everyone is a star today, everyone is a brand and Kayla was negotiating the waters of her own emergence. In the end, it actually felt like a survival instinct, the rage against the dying light. We all have them, those quirks that pop up to keep us sane. Kayla had them, and it was her lesson in using them properly that was the most pointed reminder of eighth grade.

My eighth grade? Well, since I was taller than most of my classmates, I was eye-to-eye with many of the girls who were driving me crazy. But otherwise, I was going through the same unnerving process that was either going to embitter or inform Kayla. Bo Burnham has told a noble story of empathy.

“Eighth Grade” opened in Chicago on July 20th, part of a nationwide limited release. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Elsie Fisher, Josh Hamilton, Luke Prael, Jake Ryan and Emily Robinson. Written and directed by Bo Burnham. Rated “R”

[17]

By PATRICK McDONALD [18]
Editor and Film Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [17]

© 2018 Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 28 2024 - 2:05pm*):
http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/28689/awkward-difficult-is-played-out-in-eighth-grade

Links:
[1] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq
[2] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/a24
[3] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/adolescence
[4] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/bo-burnham
[5] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/eighth-grade
[6] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/elsie-fisher
[7] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/emily-robinson
[8] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content
[9] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jake-ryan
[10] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/josh-hamilton
[11] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/luke-prael
[12] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html
[13] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/patrick-mcdonald
[14] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/sex
[15] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/social-media
[16] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/youtube
[17] mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com
[18] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#PAT