

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE__8/10

A small movie on dysfunctional families running for Oscar

Directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris
Written by Michael Arndt

Abigail Breslin ...	Olive
Greg Kinnear ...	Richard
Paul Dano ...	Dwayne
Alan Arkin ..	Grandpa
Toni Collette ...	Sheryl
Steve Carell ...	Frank

The Academy Award nominees for best picture of 2006 are as follows:

Babel
The Departed
Letters from Iwo Jima
Little Miss Sunshine
The Queen

And though I've seen and reviewed Eastwood's companion film to Iwo Jima, *Flags of Our Fathers*, the only movie I've seen on this list so far is LMS. My personal feeling is it's a good movie—perhaps providing unique insights into how to resolve a dysfunctional family—but not big enough to win the Oscar.

The setup: we learn very quickly the nuclear family portion of the ensemble consists of a motivational speaker Pop (Greg Kinnear), his long-suffering wife Sheryl (Toni Collette), a seemingly psycho son Dwayne who reads Nietzsche and doesn't speak, and Olive (Abigail Breslin), the daughter innocently addicted to child beauty pageants.

Add to the mix Sheryl's gay brother Uncle Frank (Steve Carell)—crashing with the family because he attempted suicide upon losing his job and being outed—and heroin advocate-philosopher Grandpa (Alan Arkin) who offers his perspective to everyone having problems, especially his two grandkids.

The plot centers around the need to get Olive to a beauty pageant in California from New Mexico, where the strange family lives. They're scraping by, basically, and have to pile into a VW bus for the trip. It's a road pic and a good 'un.

Each of the characters is tantalizing complex, and they unfold during the journey through striking off one another. The root of the adventure is Olive's genuine motivation to be the best she can be in the context of beauty queenery. She's innocent of the contrivances that surround the pageant business.

The final scene with Olive's performance at the pageant strikes a blow for honesty and integrity... and genuine human feeling. It's quite an exhilarating climax, bringing to a head the other quiet stories of self-discovery.

Like the movie *Sideways*, this is a character-study movie. It has the same qualities of humor and pathos. But the tapestry is more complicated here. Performances by each of the actors are extraordinary, perfectly stated, which means great actors and great direction. As for the chances on Sunday, I sort of feel LMS is this year's *Sideways*: not the best movie in the field, but the most fun and liberating to watch.

Special kudos are due Alan Arkin as Grandpa. His is truly a mind-opening role, and he is nominated for best supporting actor (funny how in ensemble-cast movies everyone is actually in a supporting role). He dispels all the hard-drug user images, I'm sure much to the chagrin of the drug-law thugs.