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The Not-So-Straight Story

Anne Crémieux

- 1 When his lawnmower breaks down in *The Straight Story*, Alvin Straight buys a new one and slowly makes his way from Iowa to Wisconsin. The bovine pace of this Midwestern odyssey made it a road movie like no other before, with some interesting encounters, a few laughs, talk of family and death, and a final reunion. *Little Miss Sunshine* has a similar agenda, with a lot more laughs. Maybe going cross country in an inadequate vehicle should be a genre unto itself, a formula for unassuming philosophical tales of American ethos. The Hoover family, however, is not reuniting with an aging relative, but instead take him along and eventually fight to keep him. Instead of riding the little engine that could, the Hoovers are themselves the engine. As it should, the film's poster says it all: the family cannot count on anything to work but itself, and it takes six little Hoovers to start a VW bus, and 12 pairs of running legs to stay on it.
- 2 *Little Miss Sunshine* is all about technological progress led by the spirit of enterprise, something many widely believe to be the source of economic prosperity in the West, and a model to emulate. Richard Hoover, father of the clan, and his 9-step program to success would certainly agree on that point—enterprise is at the source of personal fulfillment.
- 3 In 2006, the Hoover brand is still a leader in the vacuum cleaner market, but how did it all start? According to the Hoover website:
 Necessity and ingenuity have long been driving forces behind the world's great inventions, and the Hoover vacuum cleaner is no exception.
 The story begins in 1907. Murray Spangler, an inventor who worked nights as a janitor, was cleaning rugs in a Canton, Ohio, department store. (...)
 Spangler gathered a tin soap box, a fan, a sateen pillow case and a broom handle, then assembled an odd-looking, cumbersome contraption that managed to pull the dust away from the air he breathed. (...)
 Spangler's family friend, Susan Hoover, agreed to try the machine in her home. Before long, she was singing its praises to her husband, W.H. "Boss" Hoover, owner of a leather goods manufacturing shop. Hoover bought the patent from Spangler in 1908 (...)

- 4 Here is the kind of success story Richard Hoover can only dream of, as his 9-step program fails to impress entrepreneur Stan Grossman.
- 5 And yet, one must wonder: Why do the Brits “hoover,” instead of “spangle”? Perhaps because Spangle was just a janitor, and not a big “boss”? Not a “groß” man? Because investors are more important than inventors? Was Richard ever really given a chance to be the winner he teaches others to become? Does Olive and her playboy manager of a grandfather belong in the *Little Miss Sunshine* contest? Is the playing field level? Is America the land of equal opportunity?
- 6 Thankfully, such questions are most unbecoming to a witty comedy about family. Instead, the film plays on oppositions. Two brothers-in-law, a Proust scholar and an entrepreneur. Two kids, a carefree 7 year-old performer and a disturbed 16 year-old misinterpreter of Nietzsche. A debauched, drug-addicted father and a self-righteous, unimaginative son. Yet, the gay, suicidal brother is allowed to tell his niece about his unrequited love at the dinner table and the junky, philandering grandfather shares his wise views with his grandson about how drugs should be consumed only in old age, while sex is the privilege of youth. There is nothing very straight about the Hoover family, but at least it is out on the table, making for hilarious outbursts and matter-of-fact revelations.
- 7 Yet, the collective energy and intelligence of this family is diluted in a lack of social purpose: the self-employed father cannot attract an audience, the grandfather is retired and bored, the son is a teenager abiding his time, the gay uncle is post-suicidal, homeless and jobless, and it all seems like routine. In spite of the father’s constant proactive preaching, in this family where all could be winners, all feel like losers. Except for one. We do not know how she feels about her son who won’t talk to her (or to anyone else for that matter), about her husband who neglects her, about the intrusion of her brother and father-in-law in her home, about her daughter’s passion for beauty contests, about her job, her life, her self. Much like Susan Hoover, Sheryl is a go-between, a facilitator.
- 8 She is the mother. She cares about family.
- 9 She feeds everyone take-out fried chicken in a desperate attempt to preserve the family unit. Being the only woman (Olive is just a girl, unaware of her grandfather’s very sexual artistic influence), Sheryl Hoover holds the balancing rod. She knows eating ice cream is OK, in moderation. She understands why being color-blind is a catastrophe for her son. She is the one driving force getting her daughter on stage, starting with making everyone take the trip, up to not letting Olive’s self-conscious brother and uncle keep her from performing. Unlike her husband, Sheryl’s interest in her daughter’s success is not an attempt to make up for her own failure, but to fulfill a child’s dream.
- 10 *Little Miss Sunshine* draws its humor not from improbable slapstick or special effects, but from the burlesque quality of everyday life and the cosmic struggle to maintain balance. This very humor drives the film’s dramatic force as well. One look at the faces of Olive’s competitors is enough to realize making model housewives out of pre-pubescent girls is more indecent than Olive’s miming of a pole dance in a hooker’s outfit. *Little Miss Sunshine* is about capturing beautiful shots of ugly American landscapes, rather than conventional shots of America’s natural monuments.

- 11 Directing couple Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris' first feature film is presently suffering from a classic case of too much praise directed at a small production. Undeniably, certain comic effects are stretched a bit beyond their call. The problem with comedies is how hard—and ultimately how rather pointless—it is to take them seriously. *Little Miss Sunshine* deals with important issues, from porn and anorexia to bureaucracy and death, with many cathartic moments played as great jokes rather than excellent insights. The best part in *Little Miss Sunshine* may well be the drama, rather than the comedy, if only because drama is more fun when it is hilarious.
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