

Venus and The Pursuit of Happyness: two films with a little something to say

Joanne Laurier
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Venus, directed by Roger Michell; screenplay by Hanif Kureishi; *The Pursuit of Happyness*, directed by Gabriele Muccino; screenplay by Steve Conrad

Two ailing and aging actors take center stage in British director Roger Michell's new film, *Venus*. Discussions over a croissant between Maurice (Peter O'Toole) and Ian (Leslie Phillips) focus on their prescription uppers and downers and the rare acting jobs that come their way. Estranged wife Valerie (Vanessa Redgrave) jests that Maurice is being typecast when he plays a corpse (or near-corpse) on a television drama.

Past glories are referred to: "He liked your Polonius but thought your Caesar was fruity." And these same glories are remembered as the pair amble among the graves of former colleagues at St. Paul's in Covent Garden (the Actors' Church).

But any thought of going "gentle into that good night" is interrupted by the sudden presence of Ian's grandniece Jessie (Jodie Whittaker), a troubled working class teenager who's been banished to London to care for her great-uncle. Her unruly and slovenly habits cause Ian to weep "more than Antigone." Just as he is about to "scream for euthanasia," Maurice, a self-proclaimed "scientist of the female heart," steps in.

Jessie becomes Maurice's *tabula rasa*—as well as his final audience. He seductively exerts on her the powers developed over a lifetime. Charm and culture allow him to bring out Jessie's inner goddess (i.e., Venus). Shifting between the roles of Henry Higgins and Humbert Humbert, Maurice tells Jessie (who swings between those of Eliza Doolittle and Lolita): "I'm impotent, but I can take a theoretical interest." However, he proves somewhat more active than this implies. An incredulous Ian asks Maurice how he's been able to neutralize the *enfant terrible*, to which the latter replies: "It's a funny thing, I'm nice to her."

Venus is an homage in part to the acting profession and to the hard-working artists who once dominated the stage only to end up scraping the bottom of the barrel. The obsession with youth seems to have become even more pronounced in

recent years. Even an actor of O'Toole's stature is lucky to get bit parts, such as the minor roles he undertook in *Troy* and the remake of *Lassie*. Interestingly, four years ago, when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences offered the 70-year-old O'Toole an honorary Oscar—in view of his age and the fact that he'd been nominated seven times without ever having won—he turned it down, saying he was too young. Asking the Academy to defer the honor for 10 years, he famously added that "I might win the bugger outright."

Michell's movie has given O'Toole that possibility with an eighth nomination for his performance in *Venus*. Furthermore, the film makes a case against a society phobic about old age, whose upper echelons consider the elderly to be so much dead weight. About O'Toole, scriptwriter Hanif Kureishi movingly asserted: "I think he's an actor who's brave enough to show himself as an old man, not to be afraid or ashamed of what it is to be old and how shockingly different you look to the way you looked when you were 25, as he did once, a terrifically beautiful man."

O'Toole as Maurice doggedly pursues his passions in the face of his impending death. In the words of Dylan Thomas, he is one of those "Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight/ Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay."

Despite an elegantly rendered interpretation of the dilemma of these aging men, *Venus* proves to be unnecessarily light fare. More could have been made of Jessie's harsh milieu and problems. Her alienation and disaffection, socially rooted and deep-going, are all too easily dispelled in the film.

Nor, in the end, is it entirely clear what attracts her to Maurice. That he treats her with a certain respect, bestows on her a bit of his erudition and gives her a few baubles seem an inadequate draw for someone with her background and emotional profile. Somehow this is to underestimate the depth of her (and others') intellectual and cultural deprivation.

This points to a more general problem. How seriously are

Jessie and her situation really taken by the filmmakers? Her character is too amorphous, further weakened by emotional transformations that are often artificial and unconvincing. Whittaker is in the unfortunate position of having to create the flesh and blood of a lead character who is largely a narrative mechanism, a foil for O'Toole's polished and expansive Maurice.

Even so, a movie that strongly and intelligently advocates that "Old age should burn and rave at close of day" deserves some recognition.

Under conditions where official American public opinion makes everything of wealth and success, the title of Italian-born director Gabriele Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the story of a man who pursues single-mindedly the goal of becoming a stockbroker, seriously risks misinterpretation. The publicity for the film, which takes its title from the famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence, would lead one to think this is simply another version of "You can make it if you only try," the contention that anyone can succeed in America if he or she makes a sufficient effort.

Happily, the film proves to be something other than a perversion of Thomas Jefferson's enlightened phrase ("life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"). In Muccino's movie, the lengths required to achieve economic security testify, in fact, to the elusive and chimerical nature of the so-called American Dream.

At the outset of the Reagan era, Chris Gardner (Will Smith) and his family live in San Francisco on the verge of destitution. His wife Linda (Thandie Newton), working double shifts in a laundry for slave wages, is the main breadwinner for the family consisting of herself, Chris and their son Christopher (played by Smith's endearing son Jaden Christopher Syre Smith).

Chris's dream of being a successful entrepreneur is evaporating with each of his unsold portable bone-density scanners, clunky devices costing twice as much as x-ray machines, but yielding less than half the diagnostic benefits. Linda, near physical and mental collapse, strikes out on her own, leaving Christopher with his father and a wretched day care facility in Chinatown, whose building sports a graffiti misspelling of 'happiness' (hence the film's title).

Without Linda's paycheck, father and son are soon evicted from their apartment and forced to find refuge in public bathrooms, subway trains and eventually a homeless shelter, where enormous numbers of the city's indigent population line up in the afternoon for a limited number of beds.

Chris, equipped with remarkable mathematical abilities and now possessing nothing but the clothes on his back, embarks on an unpaid six-month internship at a brokerage firm. He is one of 20 exploited hopefuls, only one of whom will eventually earn a permanent spot in the elite company.

While other trainees put in 10- to 12-hour days making cold calls, Chris's schedule is determined by the need to pick up his son in time to stand in line at the shelter. He must furiously sell during a compressed working day, then at night join the ranks of the most downtrodden, including the working homeless—a phenomenon that picked up momentum during the Reagan presidency.

His are circumstances that would severely traumatize and possibly crush the average person. Chris Gardner, exceptionally performed by Smith, is a talented man, endowed with considerable intellectual gifts and vast determination. The backbreaking pursuit and realization of his goals point not to a society that offers great opportunities for the taking, but quite the opposite. *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrates that someone like Chris, particularly as an African American, may be lucky and skilled enough to attain success, but not before walking through fire and brimstone for the powers that be. He is the exception that proves the rule! What is the fate of those not so fortunate or skilled?

There are moments and lines ("Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something.... You got a dream, you gotta protect it.... If you want something, go get it. Period.") that are frankly hard to take. In general, the film is marred by the lack of a genuinely critical attitude toward American society, even though it shows some pretty horrific details. It leaves the door open for the notion that individuals can simply pick themselves up by their bootstraps. Nonetheless, whatever the conscious intentions of the filmmakers, the bulk of *The Pursuit of Happyness* reveals the soul-wasting nature of poverty and the lack of prospects for those condemned to economic oblivion.



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