

Win Win: Recognizably and unusually human

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Written and directed by Tom McCarthy

Win Win, the third film from writer-director Tom McCarthy, is a decent, intelligent movie. Amusing and relatively observant, the story about a struggling suburban lawyer and the athletic prodigy he stumbles on is not earthshaking, but sincere and genuinely heartfelt.

Mike Flaherty (Paul Giamatti) is an eldercare attorney whose practice is in trouble, a victim of the economic downturn. Neither he nor the accountant, Stephen Vigman (Jeffrey Tambor), with whom he shares a small building can even afford to fix an ancient, clanking furnace or a recalcitrant toilet. He hides his troubling economic situation from his wife Jackie (Amy Ryan).

Stress is threatening to lay Flaherty low, literally. He's anxious, he tells his friend Terry (Bobby Cannavale), about "work, money, everything," about how to "keep my practice going.... I have no idea what to do."

A golden opportunity apparently presents itself. Mike obtains the guardianship of one of his clients, Leo Poplar (Burt Young), suffering from an early stage of dementia, which comes with a healthy monthly payment. Unable or unwilling, however, to truly take care of the prickly older man, who wants to stay in his own house, Flaherty sticks him in a senior center.

On top of that, Poplar's grandson Kyle (Alex Shaffer) appears out of the blue. In the face of a difficult home life in Ohio, including his mother's present enrollment in a drug rehabilitation program, Kyle has come to stay with his grandfather, whom he doesn't know. Bringing Kyle into their home temporarily complicates life for the Flahertys, but Mike, a part-time high school wrestling coach—with Vigman and eventually Terry serving as his assistants—is overjoyed to discover that the 16-year-old is a dominating presence in the sport.

Not only is Flaherty able to pay his bills on time for a change, but some respectability for his wrestling team, which has hitherto known only defeat, seems in the offing.

The arrival of Kyle's mother, Cindy (Melanie Lynskey), changes the circumstances to Mike's disadvantage. Leo's daughter has her own quasi-mercenary agenda, and she determines soon enough that Flaherty has been up to something shady in regard to her father's living situation. The revelation threatens his professional and personal relations.

McCarthy has now made three sensitive movies, counting *The Station Agent* (2003), *The Visitor* (2007) and the present work. *The Visitor*, with Richard Jenkins, dealt compassionately with the plight of immigrants caught up in the so-called "war on terror." *Win Win* addresses the problems of those under economic duress.

Flaherty is an upright person caught in a painful, threatening situation—on "the brink of financial despair," as the film's production notes put it—like millions of Americans. He wants to treat other people well, but circumstances are working against him and he convinces himself all too easily that what benefits him is also in their best interests.

The performers are all fine. Giamatti convinces us, as he usually does, about the compelling and contradictory human situation his character faces. The interplay between he, Cannavale and Tambor is lively and entertaining. Tambor (*Arrested Development*, etc.) in particular has the relatively rare and wondrous ability to react to people and events—especially with indignation, surprise, disgust, etc.—and offer at the same time a comic criticism of his own response.

Amy Ryan (*The Wire*) is persuasive as the no-nonsense, suburban housewife, with essentially honorable instincts. At first suspicious of and even hostile toward Kyle, and protective of her two young

daughters, Ryan's Jackie is the first to be genuinely moved by the boy's plight, acting not so much out of motherly instinct, but elementary human sympathy. The scene in which her eyes are opened to his circumstances is affecting.

Shaffer, a New Jersey high school wrestling star with no acting experience, does very well as the complicated youth around whose personality, condition and special skills *Win Win* revolves.

The director and his cast have clearly at least in part been motivated by the economic predicament in which many people in the US find themselves. McCarthy comments that "Mike Flaherty had a simple plan for his life, but in these times, it just doesn't seem to be happening. He's a decent, humorous, hard-working guy who just makes one bad decision."

A native of New Jersey, Cannavale notes that "I grew up with people like this, regular, middle-class people who in an economic downturn really feel it. I know the kind of pressure that Mike is under, to feed the kids, to keep paying the mortgage. He feels like the rug is being pulled out from under him." Tambor adds, "I think we're living in times when a lot of people are up against things they've never faced before and people do funny things when that happens. Paul's character makes a strange decision, but I think it's something we all can relate to right now." The veteran Young says, "It's a rare piece of work because it's about a decent, honest man trying to save his family and his business."

I cite the comments because they accurately reflect the overall look and feel of *Win Win* (as well as no doubt a growing sentiment within the film industry itself), along with the movie's strengths and weaknesses. I've already employed the adjectives that first come to mind, "decent," "intelligent," "sensitive." It should be possible to describe the film in this manner without a hint of condescension, as an achievement, and simultaneously suggest its inadequacy.

What *Win Win* does not possess in sufficient quantities, comedy though it may be, are urgency, pointedness and anger. Its relatively genial approach to the current economic calamity affecting millions tends to speak to the social types treated in the film and those who created it.

This is not a matter of ideological purity; this quality has consequences in terms of how an audience will receive and interpret the work. The media, in its

mediocrity and complacency, works at removing the elements associated with the economic crisis and inevitably reduces *Win Win* to an "inspiring" and "heartbreaking" story about "Good people trying to be good—sometimes doing a good job and sometimes not." It must be said, however, that the film's "softness" and lack of social focus give such commentators something to work with.

But...let's leave off there. Decent, intelligent, sensitive. That's not everything, but it's certainly something. Yes, let's leave it at that.



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