

Being Flynn: Homelessness as a social failure

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Paul Weitz, based on the book by Nick Flynn

"I see homeless people everywhere. It seems like there's more and more ... A lot of homeless have jobs," says a character in director Paul Weitz's new movie *Being Flynn*.

Weitz (*Little Fockers* 2010, *American Dreamz* 2006, *About a Boy* 2002) wrote the screenplay based on the 2005 memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn. The book chronicles Flynn's life growing up in suburban Massachusetts in the 1970s and his job at a homeless shelter in Boston in the 1980s.

Voiceovers by both Nick (Paul Dano) and his father Jonathan (Robert De Niro) help propel *Being Flynn*. The elder Flynn believes he ranks with Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger as one of America's great writers. As a "classic storyteller" and "excellent raconteur," Jonathan, a cab driver who loses his apartment and eventually his cab, is convinced everything he writes is a masterpiece soon to attain global recognition. In his more cogent moments, he senses he should be writing the "memoirs of a moron."

For nearly two decades, "my father was manifest as an absence," says Nick, who himself has aspirations to be a writer. Out of the blue, he is contacted by Jonathan, now homeless, who demands that the "sole heir" to his writing legacy store his books and papers ("Destiny has brought us together for one fleeting moment"). Nick is himself unemployed and living on the edge. He has recently moved into a former strip club, sharing the space with two other men, one a drug dealer.

Nursing the emotional wound left by the suicide of his mother, Jody (Julianne Moore), for which he feels a partial responsibility, Nick is now also forced to think about the psychic impact of his surviving parent. For Jonathan, in addition to his literary pretensions and fantasies, is an angry, angry man—a racist and homophobe,

who carries around a spiked wooden club, reminding friend and foe that while in prison (for passing bad checks), "I wasn't locked up with choir boys."

With the help of Denise (Olivia Thirlby), a soon-to-be love interest, Nick lands a job in a homeless shelter where he helps manage the daily throng of the downtrodden. They include not only the long-term needy and damaged, but newly laid-off professionals as well. Out of the cold into the shelter files a nightly parade of diverse social types, some more aware than others of their predicament. In fact, many of the shelter's staff are recruited from their ranks. Introducing Nick to his duties, a colleague states sympathetically that "100 to 150 guys who come through here [tonight] will be dead. We catch them on their way to the morgue."

After many nights of sleeping "al fresco," Jonathan Flynn eventually ends up in the shelter, an event so unnerving for Nick that he turns to hard drugs. An unmoored vessel, the younger Flynn is forced to confront an ever-present, unruly and alcoholic parent, who taunts him with the refrain, "You are me! I made you!" Nick, nonetheless, over time softens to his father, who comes out with such maxims as, "To be a poet digging ditches is very different from being a mere ditch digger" and "I'm a human billboard. There is no inside, no outside, no container, no contained, no birth, no death."

Through this difficult encounter with Jonathan, an unusual and occasionally insightful figure, Nick comes to understand why his father abandoned him and why his mother killed herself, gaining in the process some emotional balance.

Being Flynn effectively tackles the relationships in this downward-spiraling family. The scenes early on between Nick as a young boy and his mother as she struggles with two jobs, guilty over her lack of time for parenting, are lifelike and touching. A sped-up sequence shows a haggard and frazzled Jody feeling less and less capable of keeping her head above water.

Jonathan's various attempts to live on the street are disturbing. One scene climaxes in a shot of him from

above sleeping on a heated sidewalk grate and curled up in fetal position, while Nick tells us: "My father is an invisible man in an invisible room in an invisible city."

The film's drama takes place entirely in the world of poverty and homelessness. Affluent social layers and neighborhoods are conspicuously absent in *Being Flynn*. Not surprisingly, most mainstream film critics limit their commentary to the father-son narrative.

The movie's production notes elaborate on the focus of the filmmakers. Weitz explains that "[w]e had a mixture of actors and nontraditional actors. There was an AIDS resource center, which sent various people to audition who had been homeless at some point in their lives ... Nick [Flynn] and I spent time at Pine Street [a homeless shelter] in Boston, which is where he worked when he was younger ... But it's not what you would necessarily think of in terms of what a homeless shelter is like, and you'll see people who look like they're coming home from their job at Google and they're just going to sack out there for the night."

Cast and crew were clearly struck by the complex social composition of the homeless population, as well as by the individual stories. This finds expression in the compassionate performances offered by all the players, with De Niro, Dano, Moore and Thirlby making up a persuasive ensemble. Poetic, black humor occasionally relieves the somber cinematography and goings-on.

Author Nick Flynn worked closely with the filmmakers to ensure that the depiction of the homeless was accurate. Shortly after the release of his novel in 2005, he described homelessness in an interview as a social, not a personal affliction: "I think of the shelter I worked in as a microcosm of the larger society, in the sense that each individual there represented some failure of the larger society, and not merely a personal failure, as the intensely individualistic culture of the USA would like us to believe ... Also, [Jonathan] came from a wealthy family, so his story is as much about class fluidity as it is about poverty. And he identifies himself as an artist, which would automatically place him on the margins of society."

"Homeless shelters have certainly become a dumping ground for a myriad of social failures, and as such they only exacerbate the problems. If you have a drinking problem, it's likely you'll be a full-blown drunk after a few months in shelter; if you're neurotic, you'll be howling mad before too long. And this is true for any of us, if we were to end up there."

Interestingly, Paul Weitz's brother Chris (co-director of *About a Boy*) was responsible for the award-nominated *A*

Better Life (2011), a movie dealing with the travails of an immigrant family in Los Angeles. The latter film, as well as *Being Flynn*, *Margin Call* (2011), the as-yet-unreleased *Think of Me* (2011) and perhaps *The Company Men* (2010) might qualify as initial efforts, in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, to treat the social crisis in the US.

These works are all tentative, somewhat cautious and not necessarily earthshaking. American filmmakers in significant numbers have not concerned themselves with important social questions for decades. That the directors of even the more admirable films are still hedging their bets somewhat, and, moreover, feel a certain distance from their material, helps account for the ongoing awkwardness and timidity of their films, qualities one also feels in *Being Flynn*.

In these movies, social breakdown is present, but other components of a personal character are still given equal or even greater weight. There is continuing nervousness about being labeled a 'social realist' filmmaker. Critics latch onto this, and it often enables them to avoid commenting on the harsh social facts in front of their faces.

No one is asking that the artist produce a didactic, propaganda piece. However, by not wrestling forthrightly with the social calamity, the filmmaker, inadvertently or semi-consciously, is accommodating him-or herself to upper middle-class public opinion. Nonetheless, as *Being Flynn* demonstrates, reality is pushing its way in through the door. This is a welcome development.



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