

Silver Linings Playbook: It's the little things in life ...

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Written and directed by David O. Russell, based on the novel by Matthew Quick

David O. Russell's new movie, *Silver Lining Playbook*, is an offbeat comedy-drama about a pair of troubled people in Philadelphia who struggle to overcome debilitating emotional difficulties. Adapted from Matthew Quick's 2008 novel, the film strives to tackle mental illness and the chaos of personal relationships, with generally unsatisfying results.

Russell is one of the more interesting American filmmakers. He has a story-telling talent and keen eye for certain aspects of culture in the US. He has written and directed *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), *Three Kings* (1999) and *I Heart Huckabees* (2004). His last film—and perhaps his best—*The Fighter* (2010) paints a devastating portrait of poverty and unemployment in the collapsed former industrial town of Lowell, Massachusetts in the early 1990s.

In virtually all his films, Russell has displayed an ingenious ability to unearth idiosyncratic elements in American life. However, while generally being sympathetic to people, the filmmaker has not demonstrated an understanding of the deeper motives behind their behavior or the overall source of their dilemmas.

To a certain extent, *Silver Lining Playbook* is a regression (one hopes momentary) even from Russell's previous disparate efforts, in that the film gives up on any effort to probe the characters' psychological difficulties or the context in which they play out.

Former substitute high school history teacher Pat (Bradley Cooper) has just been released from a psychiatric facility where he has spent eight months for having nearly beaten his wife's lover to death. "That's very, very manic," says his friend and fellow detainee,

Danny (Chris Tucker), of Pat's irregular behavior on the day of the latter's discharge. Recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Pat is clearly not yet well.

But he is now in the custody of his parents, Pat Sr. (Robert De Niro) and Dolores (Australian actress Jacki Weaver). Pat Sr. is an obsessive-compulsive personality with a gambling addiction. Dolores desperately tries to keep the emotional tsunamis in the household to a minimum.

Pat is fixated on reuniting with his wife Nikki by "remaking" himself. Having lost fifty pounds, he relentlessly jogs in a garbage bag in order shed water weight and has taken up reading the classic literature taught by his wife in her high school classes. In a fit of rage, he tosses a copy of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* through a closed window because the "world is bad enough" without unhappy endings. "Excelsior" is his motto and Pat tries to maintain a grip on his fragile mental state by means of a "silver lining playbook"—a plan of action for coping.

Through his best friend Ronnie (John Ortiz), Pat meets Tiffany (Jennifer Lawrence), the recently widowed wife of a local policeman, who has lost her job after sleeping with everyone in her office. ("Yes, I'm Tommy's crazy whore widow, minus the whore thing sometimes.") Catapulting into his path when Pat's out on his daily runs and chasing him down the street, Tiffany begins to provide something of a framework for dealing with their mutual dysfunctions—beyond comparing notes on their prescription medications. In the end, Pat begins to think that maybe impaired people like he and Tiffany "know something" that so-called better-adjusted beings do not.

Silver Lining Playbook has its appealing performers and moments. Cooper and Lawrence as the two leads are engaging, although not quite believable as people

who have had histories of excessive violence and sexuality. De Niro's role does not really cohere and, for the most part, it feels like he's in a different movie (probably directed by Martin Scorsese). Tucker is totally out of place, having been brought in, in his own phrase, to "black it up." Weaver as Pat's mother is convincing, as is Ortiz as Pat's friend Ronnie.

Russell's movie refers to recognizable people, locales and problems, it is not a concocted "high-tech, global action" film or some such. However, it lacks weight and staying power in the end because it only goes part way in the direction of real life. There is no strong feeling for or artistic impression offered of the current American reality, with its stressed-out population, half of whom live in poverty or near-poverty. *Silver Linings Playbook* lacks that indelible smack of the here and now, which any important work has to have.

Even though the film's characters are not wealthy—they come from Philadelphia's lower middle class—their problems are presented as purely psychological and interpersonal, entirely divorced from the greater economic turmoil and breakdown. This is not accurate; this is not the experience of vast numbers of people. Russell is distant from this, and it damages his film. Only in one scene does this larger reality enter in, when Ronnie describes how the pressures of his job and marriage are literally choking him. But the sequence barely makes a dent.

Since the filmmakers do not care enough about actual life to bring it out concretely and urgently, they also inevitably play fast and loose with its various details. As noted above, neither Cooper nor Lawrence, although pleasing to watch individually and as a couple, truly matches the personality each is supposed to represent. And why does the same cop appear within seconds each time Pat blows up? Why is Pat's therapist so unlike a genuine therapist? How can such supposedly complex predicaments be overcome with such ease? Why does the film insist on winding down in such an utterly conventional and clichéd manner?

Intriguingly, *Silver Linings Playbook* is set in the autumn and early winter of 2008 and culminates on the evening of a late December playoff game between the Philadelphia Eagles and Dallas Cowboys. That is to say, the events occur in the midst of the greatest financial meltdown since the Great Depression. Nothing, of course, obliges an artist to be attentive to

earthshaking, life-changing developments taking place before his or her eyes. However, there are consequences to being oblivious to the general human circumstances.

Russell and his collaborators are not oriented to alterations of the social and economic landscape. Most likely this is not a deliberate avoidance. It would simply not occur to them that such upheavals have a bearing on their story.

Life is about little things, so says Russell. In an interview given to the *Chicago Tribune*, the director asks: "What do we have in life, really? If we're lucky we get to a certain age, and we have each other. We have the food we like. We have our crazy little rituals. And we have each other."

This is very weak, and probably typical of attitudes within a considerable portion of Hollywood, which helps explain why so much of the current work is not up to the mark.

In any case, of course, Russell's own career belies his words. If all we have are family, friends and food, then why did he make a film about the Persian Gulf War (*Three Kings*), the hucksterism and commercialism that pervades American culture (*I Heart Huckabees*) and the economic and social disenfranchisement of a working class community in New England (*The Fighter*)?

Reductionist explanations as to why people become unhinged, or re-hinged again, are useless, but the absence of bigger social and psychic realities in *Silver Linings Playbook* is a serious artistic failing.



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