

Bryan Wizemann's About Sunny (Think of Me) released on video on demand

David Walsh
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One of the most compelling films screened at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival, Think of Me, directed by Bryan Wizemann, now retitled About Sunny, is finally available from Oscilloscope On Demand and from iTunes. It is a comment on the current state of the American film industry that it has taken 18 months for one of the best films of the year to be accessible in any format.

This is a slightly edited version of what I wrote at the time:

It is presumably not without significance to encounter this among a director's notes: "Poverty is the actual antagonist in this film, the ghost in the machine, and I wanted to allude to that constant pressure visually and dramatically." For such a comment to emerge, still highly unusual in the film world, economic processes have to have reached an advanced stage. Harsh and painful social realities have piled up to the point that they now begin to impress themselves, cutting through the confusion and political difficulties, on serious and sensitive figures as *critical, determining* facts of life.

The work in question is *Think of Me* [now retitled *About Sunny*] and the director, American Bryan Wizemann. (See interview: "Emotional truth and social truth are what I'm interested in".) The film recounts a few days in the life of Angela Jacobs (Lauren Ambrose, perhaps best known for *Six Feet Under*), a single mother in Las Vegas struggling to keep her head above water. Angela works in a call center, resides in a shabby apartment with her young daughter, Sunny (Audrey Scott), and lives, as the production notes suggest, "one paycheck away from complete desperation."

Her employer (David Conrad) invites her to participate in a real estate deal: if she can come up with \$2,000 by the end of the week, he guarantees that her

stake will be tripled. She obtains the money from her absent ex-husband, in exchange for dropping any past and future claims for child support.

Angela has meanwhile become friends with a fellow employee, Max (Dylan Baker), who also works part-time as a portrait photographer. Max tells Angela about his childless sister, Louise (Penelope Ann Miller), who has been unable to adopt. Louise comes to Sunny's eighth birthday party and is won over by the girl. She offers to babysit, tutor and spend time with her.

When the \$2,000 disappears during the party, and can't be found, Angela becomes truly frantic. She tells her boss the next day she doesn't have the money for the investment deal, and he concludes she was lying all along and fires her. Angela now considers various reckless schemes to raise money, including pretending that her car has been stolen. Max comes forward with an alternative: Louise has fallen for Sunny, and she and her husband want to help the girl by having her come live with them, permanently. The couple is prepared to pay a great deal of money for the opportunity to give Sunny a better life. The offer throws Angela into a deeper crisis.

Bryan Wizemann's film is sensitively done. Nearly all the dramatic choices seem the right ones. No one is a monster, the conditions of "constant [economic] pressure" are monstrous. "It's hard right now. I need some help too," Angela explains a little sadly and bitterly at one point. She does her best, but the odds against her are great, and there is no helping hand.

That Las Vegas, the land of tawdry and manipulated fantasies, is at the center of the foreclosure and joblessness crisis in the US is a reality that should not be lost on anyone seeking to demystify American social life.

The production notes point out that for decades Las

Vegas “was the fastest growing city in the country, until the 2008 recession decimated both the gaming industry and the construction boom. The housing vacancy rate quickly rose from 4.5 percent to 7 percent, and now thousands of newly-built condos sit empty, baking in the desert sun. On December 17th, 2010, the week *Think of Me* [*About Sunny*] wrapped production, the *New York Times* reported that Nevada had registered the highest unemployment rate in the nation.” How many film productions in recent years have bothered with such mundane details—in reality, the decisive ones?

At a public screening in Toronto, Wizemann referred to the situation in the US as a “second Depression” and dedicated the film to the 40 million Americans living beneath the official poverty line and “people all over the world.” That too is unusual.

At critical moments, *About Sunny* chooses to treat human beings, even when under great stress, with considerable sympathy and realism. As I noted in my conversation with Wizemann, I was struck—and a little surprised—by the restraint shown in certain sequences. One has come to expect, unhappily, American directors to resort to quasi-psychotic antics in such circumstances.

The actors perform admirably and honestly, and the details of life are accurately presented. In our talk, Wizemann expressed an interest in the drama of the everyday and in his new film has demonstrated that interest artistically and movingly.

Whether Angela’s ultimate course of action involves a momentary psychological leap or not, the viewer will decide for him or herself, but the overall truthfulness of *About Sunny* is beyond question.

[For insight into the trials and tribulations of an independent filmmaker and his family, see Wizemann’s remarkable 12-minute *Film Makes Us Happy*.]



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