Sean Baker's *The Florida Project*: "The joy and heart and humor of being a child"

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Directed by Sean Baker; screenplay by Baker and Chris Bergoch

Orlando, Florida, is the self-proclaimed "Theme Park Capital of the World," offering "dream" or "unforgettable vacations" in "the Most Magical Place on Earth." It is also where some of America's "hidden homeless" live below the grid and eke out a bare-bones existence. Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* focuses on that population and its tribulations.

Tough, precocious six-year-old Moonee (Brooklynn Kimberly Prince) lives with her 22-year-old mother Halley (Bria Vinaite) at the garish, purple-hued Magic Castle motel, a seedy, low-budget establishment in Kissimmee, Florida. That town is part of the Orlando metropolitan area and lies only 10 miles from Walt Disney World with its 27,258 acres (43 square miles) of theme and water parks, resort hotels, golf courses and other tourist attractions, a venue that costs a family hundreds of dollars a day to visit.

On the other hand, Halley and Moonee live in constant danger of eviction from their $38-a-night room. The Magic Castle is one of a string of such establishments, lining both sides of a state highway, which once attracted tourists by capitalizing on the nearby theme park. All that remains at the Magic Castle is the structure, a cheap-imitation-Disney nightmare.

It is summertime, and the kids are out of school. Moonee and her friends Scooty (Christopher Rivera) and Jancey (Valeria Cotto)—a latecomer to the rambunctious juvenile gang, who lives in the nearby Futureland Inn—create endless mischief for the empathetic Magic Castle manager Bobby (Willem Dafoe). He has the thankless task of keeping the motel's exterior painted and its semi-destitute residents in line, while battling bed bugs and tackling broken ice machines. Moonee warns her friends against drinking the tap water that sent her "to the hospital for a time." She points to a room and says, "The man in there gets arrested a lot." A honeymoon couple, who accidentally find themselves at the Magic Castle with all its "gypsy children," can't clear out fast enough.

Omnipresent helicopters destined for Disney World shuttle tourists back and forth above the Kissimmee blight, eliciting hostile reactions from the local population. In America today, the sight of such aircraft is sinister enough.

Scooty's mom Ashley (Mela Murder), who works in a run-down diner, occasionally packages a few meals for Halley and Moonee. Trucks arrive to dole out free food every few days. The children are also adept at scamming money to buy ice cream. Moonee: "Can you give us some change please, our doctor says ice cream is good for our asthma?"

Scooty leads the trio to derelict condos (rubbish is described as "ghost poop") and unintentionally starts a fire, creating a blaze that is "so much better than TV." At this point Ashley breaks off relations with Halley and isolates Scooty from Moonee, a terribly painful decision that has harsh consequences for all involved. Unmoored from Ashley's stabilizing influence, Halley is running out of options to raise money for overdue rent. Her attempts to resell wholesale perfumes and other swindles falter, and she resorts to prostitution. Eventually, child protective services gets involved, devastating mother and daughter.

With a deeply moving emotional current, *The Florida Project* fictionally portrays a growing marginalized section of the American population. As the production notes state: "Throughout the United States, budget motels have become a last refuge for people who have found themselves unable to secure a permanent residence. A growing 'hidden homeless' population, 41 percent of which is composed of families, struggles week to week in order to keep a roof over their heads."

The conditions in central Florida are increasingly bleak. The working class and the poor have not experienced any

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"recovery" since the 2008 recession. On the contrary.

The *Orlando Sentinel* reported in December 2015 that "More than 350,000 Central Floridians are living in poverty—more than ever before—according to new numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau. And many of the poor are children." The newspaper cited the comment of Sister Ann Kendrick of the Hope CommUnity Center in Apopka, Florida (35 miles north of Kissimmee): "In the 40-some years I've been working with low-income people, I think folks are worse off now than they've ever been. … And I'm not just talking about the number of dollars in someone's pocket; I think there's more despair than ever, too."

Astonishingly, the *Orlando Weekly* noted in February 2017 that a recent study from United Way "shows that 45 percent of households in Florida…still find it nearly impossible to obtain even the most basic necessities, and the numbers show the problem is only getting worse." The study suggests that 3.3 million households in Florida can be labeled as "working poor" homes, up from 2.6 million only three years earlier. The publication pointed out that since 2007, Florida's median income had dropped a startling 12 percentage points "and having an abundance of low paying jobs doesn't help. Last year, a report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that Florida has the lowest paying jobs in the country."

The contrast between the wonderment and imagination of the children and their abysmal physical and social circumstances is stark. The movie never deals, for example, with Halley's prostitution head-on. Instead, it shows Moonee tending to her dolls in the bathtub, shielded from her mother's activities by a drawn curtain. By focusing the camera on Moonee's innocent play, director Baker makes the reality of her life even more disturbing.

And yet, Baker does not pity his characters, nor do they pity themselves. Despite their blemishes, and this is what's unusual about *The Florida Project*, Baker loves, admires and respects them. By implication, his film condemns a social order that is to blame for their plight. Halley's intense love for Moonee and the latter for her mother ("Seriously, girlfriend!") lights up the film. They constantly create humorous, endearing moments to escape their not-so-humorous and unendearing difficulties.

In a sweet scene, Moonee takes Jancey on a day-trip adventure, coming across a field of commonplace, grazing cows. "See?" Moonee tells her friend. "I took you on a safari." The children turn their dreary surroundings into their own, more intriguing version of Disney World.

Talking with *Hollywood Reporter*, Baker explained genesis of Dafoe's Bobby: "There was a common thread," Baker said. Managers like Bobby "were reluctant fathers. They loved these families and children and had compassion, but they kept a distance since on any given day they had to evict these families and put them on the street, literally. Walking on the street with their belongings if they couldn't pay the daily rate…and he brought that to the character."

To its credit, *The Florida Project* stands apart from the trend in global filmmaking that treats working class life and sometimes the most wretched conditions in a passive, drab and ultimately uninvolving and tedious manner. Wherever it comes from, Baker has caught on to the fact—in other words, he has the intuition—that even very oppressed people are not simply beaten down, submissive and silent. His film pulsates with life and enthusiasm. The children are simply extraordinary (as is Dafoe), and extraordinarily directed, bringing to mind the Iranian neo-realist films of the 1990s.

Of course, the advantage given Baker by that intuition is not open-ended. Ultimately, the artist has to develop a more systematic, thought-out criticism of the existing set-up or that initial intuition will stop providing the necessary emotional and intellectual fuel.

Baker views his movie as the modern-day version of *Our Gang* and *The Little Rascals*, the Hal Roach-produced comedy shorts of the 1920s and 1930s: "They're set against the Great Depression and those kids were living in poverty, but they focused on the joy and heart and humor of being a child, and we wanted to do the same thing.

"We're living in such politically heated times and audiences might think that they'll spend $15 [movie ticket cost] to just be inundated with statistics and heartache and tragedy. … [However], Housing is a fundamental human right."

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