

The Fabelmans: Steven Spielberg's family drama

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The Fabelmans is a drama set in the 1950s and 1960s, produced, directed and co-written by Steven Spielberg. Tony Kushner is its other writer (and a co-producer). The inspiration for the film was provided by Spielberg's own early life.

When the film opens in 1952, the Fabelmans, a middle class Jewish family, live in suburban New Jersey. Burt (Paul Dano) and Mitzi (Michelle Williams) bring their six-year-old son Sammy (Mateo Zoryan) to the movies. Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* both excites and frightens him. He subsequently stages and films, with his father's 8mm camera and a model train set, the movie's train wreck scene. His mother understands and sympathizes with his interest (even obsession), while his father now—and for years to come—merely sees it as a “hobby.”

The Fabelmans soon relocate to Phoenix, Arizona, for Burt's job. He is involved in the development of computerization (as was Spielberg's father). Family friend and Burt's business partner Bennie Loewy makes the move as well. Mitzi's frustrated artistic ambitions—her mother had discouraged her from attempting a career as a concert pianist in the interests of “safety,” personal or economic—surface in various ways. (Mitzi will later assert that “in this family, it's the scientists versus the artists. Sammy's on my team. Takes after me, except he's got real talent.”)

Sammy (now Gabriel LaBelle) begins turning out more and more technically involved movies with friends and fellow Boy Scouts. Moreover, Sammy films what proves to be a fateful camping trip the family takes, along with Bennie.

Mitzi's Uncle Boris (Judd Hirsch) arrives unannounced. Boris, who ran away to join the circus, says he understands Sammy's obsession with filmmaking and the conflicts that will inevitably engender. “Family, art ... it'll tear you in two. ... Oh, you love those people, huh? Your sisters, your mama, your papa. Except ... Except this. This [i.e., filmmaking], I think you love a little more.”

While editing the footage from the camping trip, Sammy

realizes he has captured Mitzi and Bennie expressing feelings for one other. After treating his mother coldly for weeks, he finally shows her the “incriminating” film, while promising not to tell.

The family moves to Saratoga in Northern California, again for Burt's computer work. Bennie is left behind in Phoenix. Two anti-Semitic bullies, Logan (Sam Rechner) and Chad (Oakes Fegley), pick on Sammy at his new school and make his life miserable.

After the family moves into a new, relatively lavish home, Mitzi and Burt announce to their despairing children plans to divorce. She is depressed and misses Bennie too much (and eventually moves back to Arizona). Sammy throws himself into his filmmaking as consolation.

He meanwhile develops a relationship with a lively, devout Catholic girl, Monica (Chloe East). A number of amusing scenes occur between the two. As Sammy comes to learn, Monica has dedicated a wall of her bedroom (in “sort of a shrine”) to images of various teen idols of the day ... and Jesus! In the face of his surprise, Monica explains that “Jesus is sexy” and that “Probably, he looked like you ... a handsome Jewish boy.” Without much further ado, she pounces on him.

In the film's quasi-epilogue, Sammy is pursuing his ambition to be a filmmaker in Hollywood. He encounters a crusty John Ford (filmmaker David Lynch), who brusquely offers a singular insight.

The Fabelmans is an affectionate, amiable work. The actors do well. The episode in which Sammy discovers his mother's feelings for another man, through inadvertently filming the pair, is affecting and apparently based on reality, as are its consequences. Spielberg's parents, both now dead, divorced in the mid-1960s.

Spielberg is an enormously successful film director. Since the mid-1970s, he has been, for better or worse, American society's principal official entertainer and chronicler. He clearly has a “popular” touch, attracting large audiences for *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*,

the *Indiana Jones* and *Jurassic Park* films, etc. There are undoubtedly artistically successful and truthful sequences or portions of *Schindler's List*, *Munich* and *Lincoln* in particular, ensuring that those films will endure.

A decade ago, the WSWS commented that Spielberg was a complex figure, whose career reflected some of the intense contradictions of US society and cultural life. On the one hand, we argued, he “is obviously a genuinely gifted—and humane—filmmaker, with a remarkable technical grasp and intuitive feeling for the medium and its vast possibilities; on the other, his work has been markedly weakened by the generally stagnant climate in which he and others have worked, reflected in the complacency, conformism and shallowness of too much of his filmmaking.”

“Spielberg’s weakest side,” we noted, “finds consummate expression in his role as a major champion and fundraiser for the Democratic Party and highly visible supporter of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.”

These contradictions find reflection in *The Fabelmans*, a highly personal account of the postwar years in America that excludes nearly everything except the immediate family circumstances. Although, for example, Spielberg once told an interviewer that his parents talked about the Holocaust “all the time ... so it was always on my mind,” and, moreover, his father estimated that he lost between 16 and 20 relatives to the Nazi crimes, in both Ukraine and Poland, not so much as the shadow of these mid-century tragedies is hinted at in the new film.

Nor is there any direct or indirect reference to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union, to the election and then assassination of John F. Kennedy, to the civil rights movement or any other phenomenon that had such an impact on postwar generations.

There is no reason to believe that Spielberg and Kushner deliberately suppressed these events in the creation of their drama and their characters’ psychological makeup, even in the case of the Holocaust. All that may well not have occurred to them. But that, to a certain extent, is precisely the point.

In regard to this latest film, Spielberg told the *Hollywood Reporter* that his life with his mother and father “taught me a lesson, which I hope this film in a small way imparts.” He continued, asking, “when does a young person in a family start to see his parents as human beings? In my case, because of what happened between the ages of 7 and 18, I started to appreciate my mom and dad not as parents but as real people.” This is a lesson, but truly a small one.

The depiction of individuals who turned (or tried to turn) almost entirely inward, making a fortress out of family life, whether out of understandable anxiety about the outside

world or because of their increased well-being, or a combination of factors, may correspond to reality—at least superficially.

No doubt, the powerful postwar economic boom in the US, the “upward mobility” and growing prosperity of considerable sections of the professional middle classes, the general atmosphere of moral-political conformism and cultural stagnation had that impact on specific social layers. They were *encouraged* to imagine they could live apart from or outside of the painful, exploitative conditions experienced by the vast majority. They could also “move forward” from historical traumas and not look back. Such layers thought their lack of interest in great political problems meant they were relatively immune from the impact of those problems. And, for a period of time, during the postwar years, they were.

However, when it comes to creating important art, such objective, perhaps even unavoidable facts may come back to haunt one. Important art does not emerge from being cut off—or holding oneself apart—from broader realities, even if the source of that separation lies outside one’s immediate control, in definite historical and ideological difficulties.

As we also noted on the WSWS, in regard to Spielberg, “Genius is not something that is simply willed, or the result of a combination of certain artistic, technical skills. It’s also a product of historical conditions. (Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Bolsheviks’ Commissar of Education after the Russian Revolution, once quipped, ‘be born a genius by all means—but the most important thing is to be born at the right time.’)”

It may be enough to ask whether anyone can imagine a Ford, a Jean Renoir, an Orson Welles, an Akira Kurosawa, a Luchino Visconti making such an ultimately self-congratulatory work as *The Fabelmans*?



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