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THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS ___7/10

If you think you have problems!

*Written by Steve Conrad
Directed by Gabriele Muccino*

Will Smith ... Chris Gardner
Jaden Smith ... Christopher
Thandie Newton ... Linda
Brian Howe ... Jay Twistle

Will Smith was nominated for an Oscar in his role as Chris Gardner, a struggling medical device salesman in 1980s' San Francisco who one day gets the inspiration to better himself by becoming a stockbroker for Dean Witter Reynolds. Gardner is a real person who years later reaches his dream of fortune through his own investment firm, and even fame as a motivational speaker and philanthropist.

It all makes for an inspiring movie albeit a grueling one. Like *The Last of the Mohicans*, the lead character finds himself seemingly in a constant full run—in Chris's case either to catch a bus, put a dime in the parking meter, pick up his son Christopher at day care, meet an appointment, prevent his landlord from evicting him, and so on.

When not running at full-tilt boogie, Gardner encounters one major obstacle after another.

Sales of his network-marketed portable bone scanner are slow (yet it doesn't stop a hippie chick or an old crazy man from trying to steal it), he's behind on the rent, his wife Linda (Thandie Newton) leaves him, his son's day care center pacifies the kids with daytime TV drivel and sugar treats, friends stiff him on debts they owe, the city impounds his car... and that's in the first five minutes!

Seriously, the movie does a fabulous job conveying the frustrations so many well-meaning lower income people, particularly minorities, face as they try to get ahead. The IRS even attaches his meager bank account for back taxes!

And seeing a young man Jay Twistle (Brian Howe) emerge from a streetside beautiful red Ferrari, Gardner asks the man what he does. Stockbroker. He sees his break. He manages to convince Twistle to give him the opportunity to take the training course and become a fulltime stockbroker. Two problems: a) Gardner doesn't get paid for taking the course, and b) only one in 20 graduate to become employees.

Naturally, due to the extra time needed to study as well as to take care of his son, Gardner falls behind in other areas of life such as selling bone scanners. He's evicted and for a time becomes effectively homeless. A scene in the movie conveys the desperate condition of such people as he and his son fall into a line for The Cecil Williams Glide Community House simply to have a bed and three square meals for that day.

The movie unsentimentally reveals the uncaring street world that many succumb to and few emerge from. One of the major contributions of the movie is to give us a sense of that world... as is showing us the importance of a passionate, caring father to his children.

Will Smith and the movie won Image awards for the latter, as well they should. Absentee and abusive fathers are one of the major problems afflicting dysfunctional families the world around. Chris Gardner resolved he would never abandon or abuse his own children, and Will Smith successfully portrays the heroism of such fatherly attention.

Personally, I take away from *Happyness* the enormous value of persistence. You read about the quality of persistence in every one of the motivational books, but a true-life movie like this puts it in stark relief. It's an encouraging movie to watch when one is tempted to feel sorry for oneself.

I like the evocation of the era, too.

I feel some of the critics are unduly harsh. They say the movie is formulaic. Well, virtually every movie follows a template of some kind. Didn't some great philosopher somewhere claim that there are only seven essential plots available in all literature? What matters is how well the piece is crafted and how well the scenes are acted. And in this case the movie has substantial street credit built in from the fact the story actually *is*.