

Another offbeat exploration of possibilities

Written by Mike Cahill

Directed by Mike Cahill

Michael Douglas ... Charlie

Evan Rachel Wood ... Miranda

Willis Burks II ... Pepper

Charlie: "We used to be surrounded by nothing,"

Miranda: "We still are, but now nothing has a population," then to herself, "I know how he feels... every time I pass the yuppie restaurants on the stretch of Clark Street formerly dominated by the Last Stop Before Expressway Liquor Store."

I'm not exactly sure about this quote, but it's a close approximation of Miranda's (Evan Rachel Wood) sense of life, or at least the bleak sense of her surroundings and her chances in them. Back in childhood, father Charlie (Michael Douglas) was the quintessence of a free spirit, living the life of a musician on the road... and someone who consistently thought outside the box. As evidence: in one of Miranda's kindergarten projects Charlie helps with assembly of a true-to-scale local Spanish mission of the 1600s, complete with native Americans lying dead in the mission square from syphilis and from routine killing rituals of the Church of Rome in the Spanish colonies. [Sorry, bad image for Easter Weekend]

Needless to say, the school marms found such literal interpretations—ostensibly by a five-year-old girl—troubling to say the least (and appear to have lectured Miranda and sent her home, an act that indelibly set in Miranda's mind how both she and her father were to be always united as outcasts from proper society). The movie begins with Miranda picking up her father from where society sends people who are too outcast to be left alone in the neighborhood—he's gone too far in an experiment with hanging himself, and "behavioral services" has him put away for a couple of years. She drives them back to their home, the old farmhouse owned by Charlie's father, and we learn the unique, unusual circumstances of Miranda's life.

Her mother was a beauty, a former hand model who basically gave up on Charlie and his toking, all-night jam-session, second-and-third-mortgage, nonworking-in-any-conventional-sense ways. She left before Miranda has much in the way of memory of her; so it's pretty much been Miranda and Charlie rattling around in the big ol' house, making do. When they took Charlie away, Miranda was only 15, so Miranda has had to fool the various child care bureaucracies that someone was taking care of her. She manages then to keep the house, live there alone, and work double shifts at McDonald's to pay the bills. It's lonely but she actually finds it pleasant to not have to worry about or take care of her father.

When Charlie returns, we realize what Miranda is up against: she loves her father dearly, but has to resign herself to his Don Quixote syndrome. This time, Charlie's grand scheme is to track down the buried treasure of a Spanish adventurer and a group of soldiers when they were confronted by some Indians back in 1624. Charlie has spent every waking moment of his confinement in the library and on the Internet gathering documents/maps to support his quest. And when he arrives home, guess who the smiling, enthusiastic, little-boyish Charlie wants to help him?

Right.

That's the basis of this often tender, often manic father-daughter movie—Evan Rachel Wood supplying the majority of the tenderness and Michael Douglas the mania. Miranda is really in a pickle: she's a minor, Charlie does own title to the house (though does nothing to keep it up), and she is practically compelled into helping him. The question is does she truly want to help him, and does she love him enough to believe in him or vice versa. Her love is sorely challenged.

I find the Miranda character extremely sympathetic. She has this sad-funny quality, as if she's emotionally drained but still amused at the weirdness of her life. So there's a core strength: after all, she's had to fend for herself and keep her innocence in a world of unmindful suburban contrivance that threatens to steamroll over all the charming, quixotic Charlie/Miranda pairs in the universe—as exemplified by her choice of

employment (McDonald's) and some of the other subplots. [One of these subplots sheds light on the all-American, happy-face custom of swinging, an activity I associate with faux rebellion from uptight corporate culture of the 1950s and 1960s, but is no doubt still going strong in the new century.]

She's strong yet vulnerable, and we want her to weather this mission that Charlie has set her on.

For Charlie's part, well, my own feeling is if you like Michael Douglas, this is a good movie for you. Personally, I can imagine the role played more fittingly by another actor; I'll bet if I read the story on which the movie is based I'd come up with a different way to play Charlie, whether it's Michael Douglas or someone else. I don't know, perhaps it's just I don't see enough subtle touches to bring the humanity of the character out fully. Charlie is too agitated, too intense, all the time—so much so that when he shows his deep love and appreciation for his daughter, these moments don't quite fit; I'd have preferred a less frenetic quality to the man, a more measured and reflective tone.

This is a minor caveat.

Finally, as social commentary I feel the author/director leaves too many opportunities for brilliance or poignancy on the field. It's a perfect setup: the passionate idealistic iconoclast vs. the lifeless new-age drudgery of modern suburbia. As the plot plays out, I don't get enough of the feeling that humanity is going to evolve in the right direction. In fact, I have the same feeling watching Jack Nicholson playing Randall Patrick McMurphy in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Jack's performance was... well, okay, life-affirming, I think he even won the Oscar. But the Randall Patrick McMurphy character that leapt out at you from Ken Kesey's book was life-transforming.

King of California is a comedy after all, and I find much of the humor in the wry observations made by the teenage Miranda. We want the world to be nice to people like Charlie and Miranda. More important, we want the world to accommodate and reward creative individualists in general.

We are confronted with insurmountable opportunities.— Pogo

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