

Can government high schools really be this depressing?

Written by Gustin Nash

Directed by Jon Poll

Anton Yelchin ... Charlie Bartlett
Robert Downey Jr. ... Principal Nathan Gardner
Hope Davis ... Marilyn Bartlett
Kat Dennings ... Susan Gardner
Tyler Hilton ... Murphey Bivens

Charlie Bartlett: Well, see, that's my whole point. I mean you could've been born a single cell organism on the planet Zortex. In fact, given the odds, it's probably more likely, but you weren't. You we're born a human being. And not just any human being in the history of human beings, but a human being that gets to be alive today. That gets to listen to all kinds of music, that gets to eat food from every culture, that gets to download porn off the Internet. So really, you have everything to live for.

Young Charlie Bartlett (Anton Yelchin), trapped in the quintessential teenage 'need to be popular' syndrome, threads his way guiltlessly toward a nonconformist's way of satisfying that need. The statement above is from an incidental therapy session with a fellow public school student who has thoughts of suicide. I say incidental because Charlie, recognizing an opportunity when he sees one, has found a way to become amazingly popular: he becomes the unofficial prescription drug procurer for his grateful peers. The impromptu psychology sessions— where his classmates open up about their several emotional problems— come with the territory.

Except for the prescription drug dealing, one is reminded of Ferris Bueller's Day Off and Rushmore, among others. But the plot is unique: Basically Charlie, a rich kid who has been enrolled at elite private schools, has an obsession with being liked. So much so, that he engages in illegal activities—e.g. manufacturing and distributing fake ID—which get him kicked out of the academy despite his mother's (Hope Davis) willingness to generously increase her endowment. It's not enough, and on their chauffeured drive back to the mansion, we see that Ma Bartlett is a Flower Child sort of enabler to her son. (Charlie's absentee dad is absent due to imprisonment on a tax conviction.)

The point is Charlie now has to attend the local government-school[1], which looks from the outside like any white middle class community high school. But inside, threats (and opportunities) abound. Basically, after being seriously beaten by the local bully Murphey Bivens (Tyler Hilton) Charlie is sent to the family "doctor," who unsurprisingly is a shrink. As for most practitioners in the psychological profession today, dispensing various prescripational remedies for psych problems has become second nature. And his doctor, without helping Charlie solve any real issues, sends him on his way with a scrip for Ritalin.

Turns out Ritalin is quite the little stimulant, and Charlie has way more than he needs. So being an enterprising young man—now I'm starting to think of the Young Enterprisers parallel in Tom Cruise's classic movie, Risky Business—and experiencing the powerful drug's effects himself, he thinks, "Let's just see how these pills go over with my schoomates after study hall." Sure enough, the kids get higher than a kite and want more.

Charlie is on his way from being an outcast to becoming the Magic Man everyone wants to know. He applies his entrepreneurial skills toward securing the market—turning Murphey from bully to distributor (for a health profit)— then hitting the medical journals: To expand his product line to meet the growing demand, Charlie dissembles about various psychological ailments for which his doctor continues to prescribe copious quantities of a wide variety of stimulants and antidepressants. Actually, you learn quite a bit watching a movie like Charlie Bartlett. I never realized that Ritalin could be such a stimulant, or that there were more than a handful of such drugs out there commonly prescribed. I pulled the table below off the Web:

<http://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/healthInfo.cfm?infotype=sg&DocID=10&ProcessID=7>

Imagine all the money made by the pharmaceutical companies from these medications. I think I recall Bill Maher stating once that something like 16 million school children are taking some form of psychotropic drug. (!) I don't know the actual number, but "back when I was a kid" use of prescription drugs for children with mental problems or attention deficit disorder (ADD) was unheard of. This alarming statistic, if even remote to being true, is certainly food for thought (and another column).

But back to the movie, one can see how the free enterprise system makes for a number of business opportunities in the drug business, whether prescription or outlawed—especially if the price of such drugs is artificially high through government prohibition or special corporate privilege. At Charlie's new school, his new clandestine company soon reaches the limits of growth. Yet in the process he comes to discover some things about himself that make for a cathartic resolution.

For one thing, Charlie wins the affection of Susan Gardner (Kat Dennings), whose father happens to be the principal of the school: Nathan Gardner (Robert Downey Jr.). For another, these other kids whom he's serving come to him for help with their more fundamental problems. He sees that some of them are really deeply in pain and in need of real help, and that drugs and the sort of attention these kids receive from counselors or their parents are wholly inadequate. (The writer stops short of suggesting that the coercive power of the state, when applied to schooling, might be the culprit.)

I'll leave you with that. Entertaining. Downey Jr. plays a powerful role, but these younger actors are just fine, too. A lot of food for thought in the movie and I'd recommend it to be shown to government school victims—er, students—real time.

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[1] I have to cling to the exact formulation that describes the service being rendered, and when the government doesn't actually run the schools, I'll revert for the most part to calling them "public."

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