

Slate

culturebox

Quirky in a Good Way

Why all the hate for *Little Miss Sunshine*?

By Matt Feeney

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Late last month, in the final days of Oscar-nom speculation, *Time* ran a piece by its longtime movie critic Richard Corliss lamenting the state of independent film in America. In "[The Trouble With Sundance](#)," Corliss tells a familiar story: Back in an innocent Sundance past, a few scruffy underground films emerged from Robert Redford's little film fest to score unexpected box office, then the moguls rushed in with an eye to bottling the low-budget magic. In doing so, they inevitably created another stale formula: indie-quirk. As Corliss writes: "Sundance films weren't quirky; they did quirky. Quirky became another genre."

By now, Corliss' thesis is more than valid. It's obvious. You might even say it's formulaic. The critics have a point, which they sometimes make with noticeable bitterness, that many independent films are stale and mannered. But for some of these films, this critical dismissal is a strange fate: to be faulted for pretense, preciousness, and stylistic calculation when their real achievement is to reintroduce an enjoyable sort of broad humor into American cinema. You may not find the next Bergman at Sundance, but you might well find some fancy poop jokes.

The catalyst for Corliss' diatribe was Sundance alum *Little Miss Sunshine*, which has had earned almost \$60 million at the box office and four Oscar nominations, including best picture. Like other indie-quirk films, *Little Miss Sunshine* opens in an atmosphere of psychological crisis. Uncle Frank (Steve Carrell) has been hospitalized after a gruesomely earnest suicide attempt and is forced to move in with his sister's family, which itself is showing some cracks. Maybe this is what throws people off about these movies, the stunned, anomic tone in their early scenes. The suggestion of trauma in Act I does not mean that we are embarking on a solemn examination of human suffering. It means that we are entering Cuckooland.

In Cuckooland, people with whom you might otherwise identify get away with things that they would normally never even attempt. For example, it is pretty inconceivable that a smart, sensitive, quirky girl like Olive (Abigail Breslin)—whose ambition of winning the Little Miss Sunshine pageant is what starts her family on their fateful road trip—would be drawn to beauty pageants in the first place, or that her smart, sensitive mother (Toni Collette) would allow her to compete in them, or that her cynical, adoring, protective grandfather (Alan Arkin) would go along, too. And it is pretty inconceivable that the usual indie-plex audience would look sympathetically on these indulgences. They are not the beauty-pageant demographic. Except that, well, Uncle Frank, who anyway is gay, has just slit his wrists. And older brother Dwayne (Paul Dano), who fancies himself a Nietzschean, has taken a vow of silence. And dad Richard (Greg Kinnear) is trying to market a patently moronic motivational shtick.

In other words, these characters are odd in a very formalized comedic way. Self-consciousness is part of the setup. They are almost-real people displaced into Cuckooland by a series of transparent indie conceits. The telltale stylistic quirks—the lingering close-ups, the deadpan tone—grant these characters the sort of dignity they wouldn't have in a studio comedy even as it readies you to see them doing some quite improbable things. Things like an 80-year-old snorting heroin and a ferociously repressed middle-aged man directing his family to steal a corpse.

The overtness of these gestures raises all sorts of red flags among critics, who have grown wary of Postmodern tricks in the Tarantino era. But since it's comedy we're talking about, the overriding critical

question would seem to be: Is *Little Miss Sunshine* funny? I found it pretty funny, funnier by a long shot by than the vast majority of mainstream comedies, and, at the indie-plex screening I attended, a lot of people laughed. *Little Miss Sunshine* may not be a great film. The dad character is saved from being a malicious caricature only by Kinnear's marvelous performance, and the dance-party climax is pat and saccharine. But why should anyone be so annoyed by a genial comedy that clearly satisfies the genre-requirement that it be funny?

Corliss' piece recalls the weird hostility that greeted Wes Anderson's 2001 film *The Royal Tenenbaums* as well as the backlash against sensitive jokester Zach Braff in the wake of *Garden State*, his mushy 2004 comedy. (A middling effort with a few good laughs, but again, why all the hate?) Like *Little Miss Sunshine*, *The Royal Tenenbaums* emerged from a festival debut and became a genuine art-house blockbuster, earning more than \$50 million in American theaters. Critics admitted that *The Royal Tenenbaums* was smart and funny, but they groused that it was (in A.O. Scott's words) "unbearably show-offy."

What's strange is how seriously the critics took Anderson's explicitly, indeed broadly, comic affectations. When I first saw *The Royal Tenenbaums*, I laughed a lot. I took its deliberate style—the flat affect, the flagrantly symmetrical frames packed with eccentric detail, the storybook narration—to be a kind of visual slapstick. It was Python-esque in its excess but decidedly Andersonian in its fussiness (which was also excessive, and also funny). And the style, crucially, set up the film's cartoonish physical humor, as when lovelorn Richie Tenenbaum (Luke Wilson) forces us to imagine what a *real* meltdown on the center court of Wimbledon would look like, and when drugged-out family friend Eli (Owen Wilson) slams his convertible into the Tenenbaum mansion, flies through the living-room window and, sitting up, points his painted face at his feet and asks, "Where's my other shoe?" If this is a rogue indie auteur's self-referential preening, I thought at the time, well, that can be funny, too.

My favorite marriage of indie-quirk and broad humor is Miranda July's exquisite *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, about an emotionally damaged shoe salesman and the waiflike performance artist who falls for him. (How's that for indie high concept?) *Me and You* did not become an indie-plex blockbuster, but it did win festival prizes from Sundance to Cannes. (Critics, though they mostly loved it, tended to worry that other critics would hate it for seeming precious, quirky, etc.)

Against (again) a backdrop of trauma and loneliness, the film's characters—children, teenagers, thirtysomethings, and septuagenarians—were thrown into an eerie matrix of sexually tinged relationships. This sounds dicey, but July handled these interactions so delicately that they came off as not only appropriate but redemptive. And hilarious. The film's funniest and most affective subplot involved an Internet sex-chat between an unwitting gallery manager and a 7-year-old boy. There was absolutely nothing exploitative in these scenes. But July *was* working with a child, so she tapped the child's world for the secret ingredient in the episode's high-minded, *Caméra d'Or*-winning humor. That secret ingredient was poop.

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