

FILM: FOCUS ON FATHERHOOD



Hollywood and television portrayals of fatherhood are often mocking, cynical, or sarcastic (just think of *The Simpsons* or *Married with Children*). This is just another way that in recent decades, fathers are seen as more peripheral, and their place as head or center of the family has been questioned. But despite their being the butt of many jokes and stereotypes, their place in children's lives is of immense significance, and their absence (as in so many American households) is powerfully felt.

In many films that depict family relationships (rather than romantic ones), fathers often come into their role through the backdoor. A few compelling portrayals of "accidental dads" that come to mind are Gregory Peck as the widowed Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), Dustin Hoffman as a divorcing father battling for custody of his son in *Kramer versus Kramer* (1979), and Tom Hanks, also widowed, looking for Ms. Right with his son's help in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993).

There are also classic depictions of family patriarchs in comedy or drama, presiding over unthinkably

large broods, as in *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950, 2003), *Spencer's Mountain* (1963), and *The Sound of Music* (1965). These larger-than-life families provide much fodder for slapstick antics, dramatic situations, and life lessons. Then there are lovable but bad role model dads—to wit, Ryan O'Neal as a 1930s con man in *Paper Moon* (1973), where real-life father and daughter are "partners in crime." And for a slapstick take on fatherhood, we have *Fathers' Day* (1997), which revisits the French farce *Les Comperes* (1983), with two competing would-be fathers tricked by a beautiful mother who needs their help as detectives.

Father of the Bride (1950), in entertaining fashion, shows us how part of fathering is letting go. Starring Spencer Tracy, Joan Bennett, and a teen-aged Elizabeth Taylor, this classic film depicts a devoted middle-class father and the rite of passage of marrying off his only daughter. (The film was remade in 1991 with Steve Martin.) The Banks family has their life turned upside-down by their daughter's surprise engagement. Stanley Banks's expressions say it all as he watches his daughter gush about her boy idol,

as his wife returns from a shopping spree, and the moment they see the parents of the groom's house (that's no shack!) for the first time. We see his mixed reaction to the engagement—a touch of jealousy and protectiveness, as though no one could ever be quite good enough for his Kay. After a madcap romp through the world of wedding planning (not much has changed in fifty years), he is left amid the wreckage of their house-cum-reception hall. It sinks in that his little girl has left them and that she will never be fully theirs again, even as she telephones to say goodbye en route to her honeymoon. The screen relationship between father and daughter is natural and affecting (Taylor called Tracy "Pops" even after they made the film). In the sequel, *Father's Little Dividend* (1951), the drama and comedy kick back into high gear when the Banks grandchild is on the way.

In the 2006 film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (PG-13), Will Smith plays alongside his real-life son Jaden. The warmth of this father-son team carries the film, which has some far-fetched plot turns (although based on a true story). Chris Gardner is a

struggling salesman who is down on his luck, while his wife has to work double-shifts. She has already lost faith in him, deciding that he'll never amount to anything, leaving for New York. Chris is determined to care for his son—something his own father never did. For most of the film, the pair must endure poverty, homelessness, and myriad obstacles while snatching playful moments in the midst of near disaster. Smith walks a tightrope as trainee in a high-pressure brokerage firm. We see him putting on a brave face, holding back from showing his pain and struggles while marketing his services to high-end clients. Smith's character is a dedicated, loving father committed to hold things together for the sake of his son. Gardner's voiceover narrative reflects on what Jefferson meant by the pursuit of happiness—that it's no guarantee, just a chance to chase it down.

Of course, true fatherhood need not be biological. The 2004 film *The Chorus* (*Les Choristes*, French) depicts a struggling composer, Clement Mathieu, who takes a job at a boarding school for troubled boys, many of whom have been orphaned during

WWII. The new teacher finds himself in the position of mentor and surrogate father to these troubled and troublemaking boys. The film pulls on one's heartstrings, as Monsieur Mathieu gradually gains the trust of his charges, daring to teach them music—something the harsh disciplinarian headmaster disapproves of (for him, it's all "Action-Reaction"). The choral music is uplifting, the period setting of postwar France thoroughly realized, and the low-key performance by Gérard Jugnot saves the story from becoming too saccharine.

A messier look at family life is *The Descendants* (2011) (rated R for strong language and adult themes). In this tragicomedy, George Clooney plays Matt King, the trustee of a wealthy, landed Hawaiian family embarking on a sale of their holdings. His marriage is on the rocks, and he has a distant relationship with his two daughters. However, this all changes when his wife is injured in a boating accident and is hospitalized in a coma. As in many other story lines about fatherhood, King is thrust into the role because of a crisis. He vows to make amends to his wife, buy her a new boat even, if only she

wakes up. Whereas before he was just a backup parent, suddenly he must get to know his daughters and enter their tumultuous world, which has been irrevocably changed by the accident. The theme of role reversal plays out in his relationship with his teenage daughter, who knows more about their marital problems than he does, and they become conspirators in finding out the truth. The comatose mother becomes a foil against which the characters experience growing pains and find unexpected paths to reconcile with one another. The setting in Hawaii is lushly filmed, and the soundtrack of folk music is a counterpoint to the heavier themes. One senses that, without the father's strong presence, it would be all too easy for the girls to go astray, losing respect for any authority. Indeed, Dad has shown up just in the nick of time. ■

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