

Let's Hear It for the Dysfunctional Family - A review essay of the 2013 films "American Hustle," "August: Osage County" and "Blue Jasmine."

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A scene from "August: Osage County," courtesy the Weinstein Company

If it were not for animated films, I'm not sure our children would see anything in today's popular media that would recommend the beauty and value of marriage and family. Too many films that received Oscar nods this year portrayed marriage and family as either a lost cause or totally dysfunctional. I'm referring to three where either the film or its lead actors were nominated for the 2014 Academy Awards: "American Hustle," "August: Osage County" and "Blue Jasmine."

The acting in each was Oscar-worthy. However, anyone watching those films would come to the conclusion that the American family is lost forever and there is little hope of anyone reclaiming the ideal God envisioned for marriage and family.



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Set in the 1970s, "American Hustle" portrays a con artist, Irving (Christian Bale), and his girlfriend, Sydney (Amy Adams), who spend their days setting up Ponzi and get-rich-quick schemes. Unfortunately, they get caught in a sting operation led by an FBI agent (Bradley Cooper). To avoid charges, Irving suggests he can help the FBI set up a major undercover operation that will expose a mafia boss and local politician. An elaborate operation is set up to catch the newly-elected mayor of Camden and a major mafia boss in the act of defrauding the citizens of New Jersey. There are plots and sub-plots with so many twists that the viewer isn't quite sure until the very end who is crooked, who isn't, who will end up in prison, and who will walk away.

But the sub-theme running throughout the film is the relationship between Irving, Sydney and his wife Rosalyn (Jennifer Lawrence) and young son. Irving views himself as a good husband and father, despite that he's a con artist and has a mistress.

What fuels his image of being a good man is he took pity on a homeless young single mother, gave her and her toddler a home, married her and adopted her son. As long as Irving can protect them, give them a good home and take care of them, that is what matters. There is no mention of love – let alone true love – or being a good role model for his son. In fact, Irving acknowledges early on that he does not love Rosalyn and it was a mutually agreed upon arrangement to help provide stability and a father figure for her son – a marriage of convenience. At the same time, this is how Irving justifies having a girlfriend.

Of course, Rosalyn's personal character isn't much better. She's a stay-at-home mom who is too self-absorbed and concerned with having nice things to pay much attention to her young boy. Zoned out on painkillers or alcohol, her son is left to take care of himself. There are times in the movie when it almost seems as if Sydney would be a better mother. She comes off as an educated and bright woman with a desire to succeed in life, whereas Rosalyn is portrayed as lazy, vain and uncaring, an all too common comparison in films.



The official trailer for "American Hustle" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ST7a1aK_lG0

In order for Irving to succeed in the scam, he must prove to the mayor he's a good family man and devoted husband. This means bringing Rosalyn along as they socialize with the mayor. The scam threatens to unravel though when Irving's wife learns about Sydney and her husband's growing love for his mistress. All three, Irving, Rosalyn and Sydney, are forced to re-evaluate what it means to be a family, a parent, a good wife and good husband. With the predictability of Hollywood, though, "love" wins out with Irving and Sydney raising Rosalyn's son while Rosalyn goes off into the sunset, free of the burden of her son, with someone who loves her for who she is.

"August: Osage County" shows another typical Hollywood view of marriage and family – that of the dysfunctional family. Violet Weston (Meryl Streep), mother of three daughters, is the family's chain-smoking matriarch with throat cancer who is also addicted to painkillers and is an alcoholic. We quickly discover she is a mean-spirited person who doesn't seem to love anyone but herself. Even her husband ultimately decides one morning to end his life rather than spend another agonizing minute with her. Her oldest daughter, Barbara (Julia Roberts), appears to be equally as mean-spirited with an unhappy marriage as well. The second-eldest daughter, Ivy, is the one who took care of her mother for years when her sisters moved away and so endured her mother's regular taunts and demeaning comments. She is also hiding a big secret – she and her first cousin are in love and want to marry. The youngest daughter appears to have been ignored by her mother altogether and has become a carefree woman who has gone from one failed relationship to another. She returns home with her newest fiancé, who subsequently tries to encourage Barbara's teenage daughter to share marijuana with him. Rounding out the family scene is Violet's sister, Mattie, who also harbors a deep secret: that the father of her son was Violet's husband.



The official trailer for "August: Osage County" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Hd_uO72hIs

From beginning to end, with the family coming together for the funeral of Violet's husband, it is one family argument after another, with Violet slinging insults at each of her daughters. No one is immune from her sharp and acrid tongue. At one point, however, Violet confides to her daughters that her own mother was equally cruel and this was how she learned to treat others. The daughters get to take their anger out on their mother as well. The climax for this dysfunctional family is Violet's revelation that she knew her husband was going to end his life but chose not to do or say anything because she wanted to be free of him and wanted his money. In the end, she gets her wish as all of her family members walk out on her.

"Blue Jasmine," while not as extreme as "August: Osage County," presents another common view of marriage as an ephemeral relationship and family as an impossible ideal. Jasmine French (Cate Blanchett) is a lost soul seeking to reconnect with her sister and find meaning again since the suicide of her former husband and loss of all

her money. Jasmine's marriage to Hal (Alec Baldwin) was perfect – or so it seemed to her. She was married to a very successful businessman who gave her everything she ever wanted. She lived in a mansion in the exclusive Hamptons of Long Island and was surrounded by friends and life was perfect – or so it seemed.



The official trailer for "Blue Jasmine" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_f--aY0pol

Her life, however, begins to crumble around her. First, Jasmine learns her husband has been unfaithful with a string of women. On top of that, Hal is convicted and sentenced to prison for multiple accounts of fraud. But, unable to face a prison experience, he commits suicide. One by one, her friends abandon her. Even her stepson doesn't want to be around her, finding her to be a shallow and vain woman. The icing on the cake is when the bank seizes all of Jasmine's remaining assets to pay back the defrauded investors.

Homeless, penniless and alone, Jasmine turns to her step-sister, Ginger, and asks if she can come to San Francisco and stay with her and her two sons. From the moment she arrives, she realizes how different her life will be. Ginger lives in a small apartment, barely making enough to pay the bills. Though Jasmine snubbed her sister in the past and Hal had defrauded her and her husband out of their life savings resulting in their divorce, Ginger opens her home to Jasmine and tries to help her adjust and define a new life.

Faced with the opportunity to start fresh, Jasmine cannot seem to adapt. She becomes depressed as she tries to reclaim her fairy tale image of marriage and family, yet realizing it never really existed. She tries to rebuild her life and attempts to find a job to support herself and seeks to meet other men but without coming to grips with her flawed perspective of relationships, marriage and life. When she does finally seem to get back on her feet and meets someone who falls in love with her, she ends up spinning a series of lies to impress him so he will marry her and she will once again have a man who would take care of her so she can escape the real world once again. Of course, once the man discovers he has been lied to, he drives off leaving her alone at the side of the road like unwanted baggage.

These three films are consistent with Hollywood's typical portrayal of marriage and family as based on premises such as: a) there is no such thing as true love; b) marriage is an impermanent relationship; c) if you aren't happy in your marriage, find someone else; d) sexual relationships outside of marriage are acceptable if one is in love; and, e) most families are dysfunctional. When such movies receive a Golden Globe, Screen Actors Guild award or an Oscar, they reinforce these perspectives of marriage and family while making it difficult for those few films that do portray marriage as sacred and relationships built on genuine love to have an equal impact on the public perception.

In the end, though these three films gave us great casts and outstanding acting, I look for a time in which such perspectives are an aberration rather than the norm.

These three 2013 films received a total of 15 Oscar nominations this year; Cate Blanchett won the Oscar for "Best Actress." They are now available on DVD and Blu-ray; via iTunes, the Google Play Store and Amazon Instant Video; as well as on-demand from major cable providers. "American Hustle" is distributed by Columbia Pictures and directed by David O. Russell; running time: 138 minutes. "August: Osage County" is distributed by the Weinstein Company and directed by John Wells; running time: 121 minutes. "Blue Jasmine" is distributed by Sony Pictures and directed by Woody Allen; running time: 98 minutes.

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