

MOVIE REVIEW: I AM SAM

All you need is love

Reviewed by Claire Staniforth

My first reaction? Groan. Another Hollywood attempt at portraying people with developmental disabilities. I always avoid this type of movie. Then again, why would anyone take a subject they care about and want to see Hollywood's 75 minute sensational version of it? Surprisingly, that's not what bugged me about this movie.

Sean Penn pleasantly surprised me in his portrayal of Sam Dawson, a young man with special needs who fights to regain custody of his seven-year-old daughter. Penn is a veteran actor with a penchant for choosing difficult and hardly glamorous roles (e.g., a death row killer in "Dead Man Walking" or sleazy lawyer in Brain De Palma's "Carlito's Way"). Sure, some of the disability stereotypes are present in this movie: goofy clothes, bizarre laugh..., but there is also depth to the character. We can see Sam's frustration at not understanding the world around him, his difficulty pulling out the salient features when telling his story, his rigidity with routines, his perseverance on details. These are traits many of us are familiar with and demonstrate that the screenwriters did some research in this area. What is nice is that Sam is given a relatively "normal" life. He has a job, a neighbour he turns to for advice, and a group of buddies to hang out with. He knows how to get around the city. He can manage simple change. He is not an annoyingly fictional hero like Forrest Gump. He's an everyday guy trying to get by.

Some of the nicest scenes in the movie revolve around Sam's interactions with his friends. One of the reasons this probably feels so authentic is the presence of Brad Allan Silverman and Joseph Rosenberg, actors with special needs. The sweetness of the scene when they try to buy kids shoes is memorable, as are many small scenes accompanied by a light hearted selection of Beatles music: Beatlemania being a theme that runs throughout the movie. This is a theme they don't take too seriously, as evidenced by poking fun at the cover of the Beatles Abby Road album by having Sam and his buddies parade across the cross-walk holding orange balloons. Still, avid fans of the "Fab Four" may be somewhat distracted hearing the likes of Ben Harper singing "Strawberry Fields Forever," or the Black Crowes doing their rendition of "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

The problem with this film? Its too ambitious. Had the movie stuck with the "I am Sam" theme, there may not have been a whole lot to object to. However, Jessie Nelson, director, co-screen writer and producer of the film, had loftier sights in mind and in one simple lyric "all you need is love" attempted to tackle one of the most

complex and troublesome issues facing people both in the developmental disability sector as well as the child welfare field in general. That is, what makes a good parent? If all you needed was love, life would be simple and we could abolish family courts altogether. The problem should really be phrased "when is love not enough?" (But I guess the Beatles never wrote that song!)

A parent certainly doesn't need to be disabled to be a bad parent — this was sloppily exposed in the poorly constructed and scripted courtroom scenes. The pathetic depiction of all higher functioning characters in the movie (including the expert witnesses) as being incompetent parents is an annoying and unnecessary ploy to make Sam look like the only empathetic parent in the film. Michelle Pfeiffer is nicely cast against-type, as Sam's over achieving "bitch" lawyer. During the courtroom scene when Pfeiffer realizes that her client is becoming confused and overwhelmed, she objects to "compound sentences." However, Pfeiffer's own scenes with her client, more often than not, are riddled with vocabulary and concepts way above her client's capacity to understand. "All you need is love" is a simplistic and shameless attempt to pull at the heartstrings of movie goers. How often in our clinical work do we hear abusive parents declare their love for their child? Having a disability doesn't preclude you from loving your children. Workers who support parents with developmental disabilities attempting to deal with the challenges of parenthood can tell you that their clients' failures to effectively and safely parent their children have little to do with love. They have to do with complex, abstract concepts such as: empathy, judgment and insight. They have to do with parents trying to get their own basic needs met, so that they have the energy and capacity to parent their children. As children get older, they need attention paid less to their physical needs and more help dealing with emotional and social challenges of everyday life. This is often a difficult challenge for parents with developmental disabilities to deal with, especially when they may have been able to cope more easily with the child's more basic needs when infants. The complexity of these issues was barely touched upon by the child welfare lawyer in "I am Sam," sympathetically played by Richard Schiff of "The West Wing" fame.

The answer to all the challenges Sam will face as a parent? "Sam loves his daughter." Sorry, love isn't all you need, and why, at the end of the movie, is the "retarded" guy the only one who can figure that out?

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