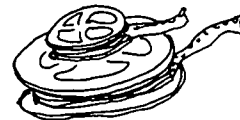


FILM REVIEW



Hoop Dreams

Hoop Dreams reminds us that everyone's life is a narrative; our own stories are full of all the approximations of life offered by fiction—tenderness, passion, disappointment and triumph. This fine documentary is the story of two teen age boys from the West Side of Chicago swept up in a dream of basketball glory, along with their parents, their coaches and the audience. The film chronicles the coming of age of Arthur Agee and William Gates, young African American teenagers recruited from local courts to enhance the winning basketball records of a suburban, largely white Catholic high school. The filmmakers began to follow these two junior high school students when they were recruited for the affluent St. Joseph's high school basketball team. Arthur Agee and William Gates both demonstrate a stunning basketball ability, and the first part of the movie is designed to narrow our vision to the basketball narrative — will they or won't they become high school stars and eventually make it to the NBA? Life in an unforgiving white suburban high school soon surprises the boys and, it seems, the filmmakers.

As the story takes a turn into the minefield of ethnic exploration with the paternalism demonstrated by the coaches at the high school and various school officials, the film reveals the jagged fit between the protagonists' expectations and

those of the school. While observing this conflict, we are brought face to face with the unpleasant aspects of the role of organized sports in American culture, especially in relation to marginalized and oppressed young men, as the stakes are demonstrated to be far higher on all sides than the mere matter of winning or losing. The school and especially the coaches seem deliberately blind to the struggles and compromises Arthur, William and their families are forced to make to continue at St. Joseph's.

The parents experience many of the life-altering crisis that families on Chicago's West Side often endure. These include job loss, welfare indignities, drug problems and spine-stiffening chills, both from shutting off the heat when one family cannot pay their power bills, to the intransigence of St. Joseph's in expelling Arthur during his sophomore year because he could no longer pay the tuition demanded. As Arthur moves to the local public high school and William suffers injuries that interrupt his ascending star in high school basketball, the filmmakers may have wished to turn away from their subjects and assume the story finished. They deserve credit for continuing to film (over 250 hours, over the course of 5 years) their story, for its richest texture comes in the last third of the movie, when Arthur and William

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redefine the meaning of success and begin to commit themselves to their own goals. Both end up in college playing basketball, but the arc of the lives no longer reaches solely toward the NBA.

Inevitably the audience wonders at the cost of the transplantation of inner city teenagers to the suburban high school for the purpose of enhancing that school's basketball record. The costs are measured in terms of the self respect, pride and ethnic integrity of Arthur and William and their families; this is the price, the film seems to be saying, of upward mobility through the narrow world of sports. The filmmakers underscore the rank counterfeit quality of the NBA dream for most young men, no matter how talented.

The two mothers, as a kind of Greek chorus in the film, offer their own perspectives on these larger issues and remind the audience of what is significant in the narrative. That their roles are truly the heroic ones, the film leaves no doubt. Alone among family members, they seem to be able to put the NBA dream in perspective; whereas this and other fallen dreams seems to have embittered or enervated many of the men (father, brothers, friends) in the film. It is the women who remind us that self respect is more important than success and does not depend on it. They cry out about the human cost of inequality; one mother shows us her cold and dark mid-winter Chicago apartment and asks "and they expect people to live like this?" Their hope and belief in their sons is what reminds the

audience of their real worth, far more than the hungry, covetous looks of the college basketball scouts who watch the teenagers play.

The two best scenes in the movie revolve around the parents. In one Arthur's mother, Sheila, has completed a course in nurse's training and has taken an exam whose outcome she is nervously waiting. As she is informed that she scored number one in her class on the exam, her incredulity, rapidly succeeded by exultant joy and thankfulness make this the most moving scene in the film. Sheila has had a very hard time during Arthur's high school year, her marriage, her job, her source of income has been jeopardized, her son has nearly failed school, yet she saved a piece of her resilience and strength for herself and we are stripped of the role of the observer and swept up without reserve in her triumph.

The other moving scene occurs toward the film's end, when Arthur has already been accepted to a junior college away from home on a basketball scholarship. He and his father, Bo, play a pickup game on the local court and the good-natured teasing and competition between them brim over with unresolved conflicts, as the anguish Arthur feels toward his sometimes absent father intersects with his father's need to brag about his own would-be

NBA career. The painful intimacy and tension of this scene vividly reminds the audience of the power of documentary — with few words an entire relationship is laid bare.

The sense is of a singular private moments inadvertently revealed to us; no created narrative could evoke a similar response.

Hoop Dreams demonstrates that documentary films, tenderly and economically told, can have a compelling cinematic quality without the contrivances and cynicism of many contemporary "slice of life" films like *Pulp Fiction*. This is ultimately the power of the film: it portrays the tensions, conflicts and joyful vibrancy of life in urban America in a way that no movie with similar themes has ever done. As a window into a world of fierce resistance to dehumanization, *Hoop Dreams* is a narrative truly and deeply felt. □

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