

THE ENDEAVOR OF RAISING A CHILD in our multifaceted society can be assisted by quality entertainment. The Parents Choice® Foundation, founded in 1978, describes itself as “the nations oldest guide to quality children’s media and toys.” Some of the criterion used to evaluate products & materials consumed by kids is its ability to entertain; yet subtly teach. They endorse what stimulates imagination, which at its best might lead a child into further reading. Themes espoused are important to review and ought to embrace values that the family believes in; a movie that appeals to people of different ages. Yet, this is where the challenge presents itself to filmmakers. Family films are particularly challenging for those who are 3D resistant and interested more in “slice of life” storytelling. Reflecting back on the archives of films from this genre, the sheer volume of material that starred Shirley Temple and the timeless messages strikes me:

In 1934, Fox Film Group released a Civil War-era film, *Carolina*. Shirley had a small role that made a big impact on audiences. This veritable scene-stealer was given top billing by the end of that year in *Stand Up and Cheer*. By the next year, the studio became the “20th Century Fox” that we know today, and they were responsible for churning out more than 20 family oriented movies starring the most popular child star ever. Their leading lady was only part of the equation, the stories were uplifting and championed values of compassion, tolerance, kindness, honor, and perseverance. Some of the films took us abroad to places like Shanghai, India, and Germany where we learned about different cultures through the eyes of our little stowaway, the orphan, or the privileged daughter of a high-ranking military man. One of the most prevailing themes that ran throughout these pictures was that circumstances were fleeting; yet ingenuity and a strong character is the everlasting coat of arms capable of turning around the most bleak of times. *The Little Princess* faced challenges and cruelty, but never let her situation get the better of her. Characters of all ages and stations were captured in these films and the enduring messages were embraced around the globe. Can stories depicting harsh situations from the eyes of child, while interfacing with the adults that populate their lives, find a place in today’s cinema? Of course animation is a sure fire way to fill theatres with kids. However, until recently, these flicks have often been less appealing to the chaperones. While those fantasy films that suspend reality and stimulate imaginations with live action have been extremely prosperous ever since the first of its kind, *The Wizard of Oz*, hit the big screen in 1939 and then along came *Mary Poppins*, *ET*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Dr. Dolittle*, to name a few. Transporting kids along with their parents, nannies and grandparents is not only profitable, but the shared experience offer talking points for families facing unique challenges of their own.

Disney stands out in this arena, responsible for producing the time-tested films that have peppered so many of our childhoods with a collection of hits. These types of films spike

ticket sales. When speaking to families through film it’s important to uphold the efforts made by parents in shaping the characters of our children as well as entertain them. Make them laugh and kindle imagination. Beloved family films drawn from family life have also been well received: *The Sound of Music*, *101 Dalmatians*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Karate Kid*, and the *Home Alone* franchise. Macaulay Culkin’s character “Kevin” was as precocious and charming as Miss Temple in his day. It seems we want to see films that co-mingle adults with kids in such unique sketches. Sports films that the whole family can enjoy are DVD’s well worth having on hand as they are adept at showcasing the sort of qualities and habits that’ll see one through difficulties. *The Bad News Bears* nailed this with humor, bringing together an ensemble cast that were relatable to a variety of ages. Disney’s *The Rookie* also managed to get inside the hearts of many. And when a studio needs a slam dunk family hit, think of those that star engaging horses with a back-story like *Black Beauty*, *Flicka* and *Secretariat*.

The gray area within the genre is knowing when it is indeed a family film, when it’s not. Some parents have learned the hard way that just because a kid stars in it, doesn’t always make it kid-friendly; think *Paper Moon*, *My Girl*, *The Good Son*, *Daddy’s Little Girls* and *Hardball*. These picks require more discernment than young audiences might have on hand. The same goes for high-caliber films like *The Empire of the Sun* or *Slumdog Millionaire*, which offer prominent parts to child actors and valiantly tackle history or social ills.

While the “coming of age” films that every generation has, does not generally fall into this category. These reflect back to us our youth - the youth of our generation - in that critical transition into teenagedom. Who wants to watch *American Graffiti*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* or *Superbad* with your parents? We didn’t.

It would be great to see more movies that the whole family can enjoy together. And, not just in animation and on the holidays.



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