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LFF 2019 Review: A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes is charmed and surprised by this take on the work of Fred Rogers.

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Last year, the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* transfixed audiences to tears. The moving narrative of children's television host Fred Rogers and his quest to instill kindness in young viewers everywhere arrived practically pre-packaged for adaptation. It's here we arrive at Marielle Heller's *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, a dramatisation of Esquire journalist Tom Junod's "Can You

Say...Hero?”, a vivid profile of Rogers that read somewhat biographically, but more distinctively as Junod’s self-reflexive act of redemption. Translating this to film, Heller has crafted a wonderfully unorthodox and tenderly performed portrait of forgiveness, very much worthy of Fred himself.

Matthew Rhys takes the lead as Lloyd Vogel (a fictionalised version of Junod), a well-meaning interview journalist who’s ultimately burdened by his acidic reputation. On top of his fragile career path, Vogel is struggling to balance becoming a father alongside clashing with his own, newly married yet equally as volatile in manner. Vogel’s assignment to profile Rogers (Tom Hanks) is at first met with reluctance; until Rogers quickly charms and beguiles Vogel that is, leading him on a pursuit to uncover the ‘real’ Mr. Rogers (if such a thing even exists). The set-up is familiar, but Heller twists it into unexpected and compelling knots. Through Vogel’s eyes, the heartfelt Mr. Rogers is morphed into an antagonist figure, an embodiment of values that defy belief and threaten to shatter Vogel’s comfortable worldview.

Rather than rolling through Rogers’ story beat-for-beat, this clearly draws inspiration from the more personal aspects of Junod’s article: its utilisation of memory, personal anecdote and self-reparation.

This is largely expressed through the two astounding lead performances. Rhys has left a definitive mark on the television space through *The Americans* and delivers another brilliant turn as Vogel, the character on which the film’s core message completely relies upon. Rhys’ transformation – one that is largely internal – is captivating to behold, and his chemistry with Hanks’ Rogers is electric. It’s difficult to overstate how brilliant it is to watch these two actors continuously steal the scene from one another. Hanks clearly enters the film with more of a cemented cinema legacy, yet the film claims this and smartly utilises it as subtext. Whilst he remains brilliant at capturing Rogers’ selfless spirit, Hank’s legacy of playing sympathetic, lovable characters on-screen is also deliberately incorporated into the performance. One of the film’s standout scenes occurs in a Chinese restaurant, as Rogers lays clear his philosophy and practically breaks the fourth wall in a hypnotic display of minimalist filmmaking.

Despite the strength of its performances, Heller’s confident direction is ultimately the film’s strongest asset. As stated above, she approaches the material in a rebellious manner that leaves this film as something of an ‘anti-biopic’. Rather than rolling through Rogers’ story beat-for-beat, this clearly draws inspiration from the more personal aspects of Junod’s article: its utilisation of memory, personal anecdote and self-reparation. Whilst this risks leaving certain nostalgia-

craving audiences unsatisfied, it absolutely benefits the film long-term. There's no questioning that *A Beautiful Day* is pitched by its studio as an awards competitor, labeled by its skeptics as mere 'Oscar bait' cashing in on the success of its documentary counterpart.

While there's no denying that this is a strong contender, if anything, it revels in subverting those award-winner conventions often to compelling effect. From its clever use of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* sets for transition shots and a subtle, twinkling score, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* is a film that respects the legacy and expectations instilled in its audience. It also has the bravery to step outside those expectations to deliver some true movie magic.

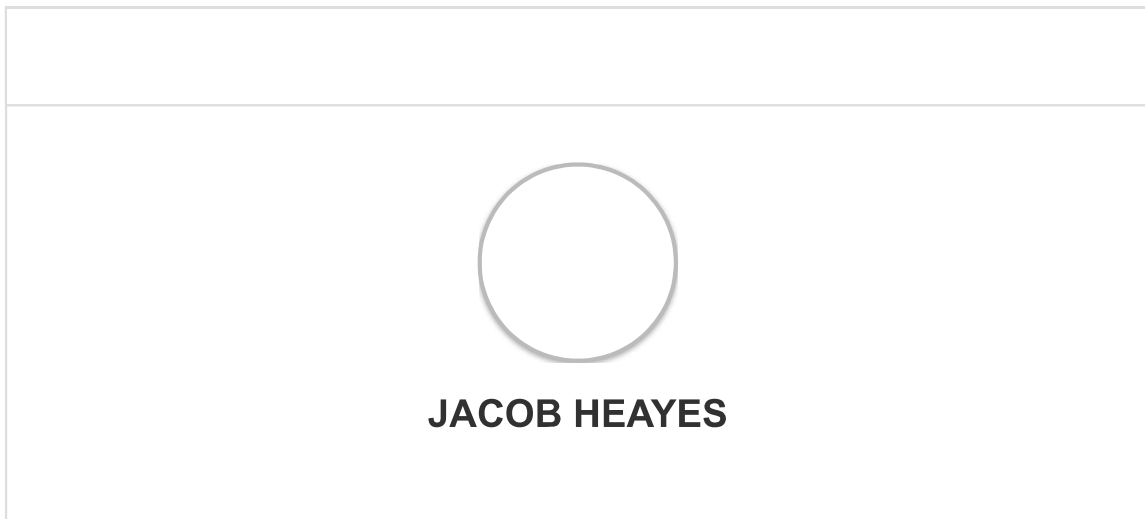
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