

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS

US, 2006, Gabriele Muccino



The title is one of the key phrases in American consciousness. This verbal icon from the Bill of Rights is considered a birthright by all Americans. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The spelling in the title here comes from a graffiti statement on the wall of a childcare centre where Chris Gardiner (Will Smith) takes his son (Jaden Smith, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett's son) while he goes out to try to sell the stock of bone density machines he has imprudently bought. The wrong spelling irritates him because he admires Jefferson but wonders whether the intention was to emphasise the pursuit while acknowledging that achieving this happiness might be impossible.

For most of the film's running time, the achievement does seem impossible and the pursuit is so physically, mentally and morally demanding that the temptation to give up seems entirely reasonable.

Chris Gardener, without benefit of college education, has set his sights on becoming a stock broker. He sees himself as good at figures and good with people. And, despite everything, he has a deep-seated confidence in his dream and in himself. And he has an overwhelming love for his son.

The person he is not good with is his wife, Linda (Thandie Newton). Or, he is good, but she can't take the uncertainties, the financial pressures, the hard life. She leaves. Chris then has to pursue his unpaid internship as a broker, trying to sell the bone machines at weekends (with his son tagging along), working less time than his fellow interns because he has to go across town to collect his son and bring him home and feed him.

And then things really start to go wrong! A genial man, Chris is imposed on by the supervisor and by friends. Tax troubles, an overnight stint in gaol for parking ticket non-payments, traffic jams delaying appointments, eviction from home, queuing and struggling to get into night shelters, a night in a railway station men's toilet for father and son.

Audiences feel the pain of father and son, the bewildered five year old who is supportive but who really does not understand, the father who wants only the best for his son and cannot provide the basics.

Yet, the film seems positive at the worst of hazards, primarily because Will Smith is such an engaging screen presence and communicates a positive outlook on life no matter what. Working with his own son, there is a wonderful chemistry between the two that makes what goes on credible and palatable.

The events are based on a true story, set in San Francisco in 1981. Interestingly, it was the year of the popularity of the Rubik Cube – which becomes a symbol of focus and perseverance as well as intelligence as Chris demonstrates he can solve the puzzle, to the amazement of a top broker, who gives Chris a chance to learn the trade.

So, it is, as they say, an inspirational story. With the pursuit of happiness and happyness, the tone is particularly American. It tends to presume that one can pull oneself up by one's bootstraps no matter what. It urges the audience never to lose sight of their dreams and believe in them. It is more than a touch capitalist in its philosophy while focusing on real and heartfelt social difficulties.

The director is an Italian, Gabriele Muccino, who directed *L'Ultimo Bacio*, which was turned into an American vehicle for Zach Braff with the title, *The Last Kiss*. Muccino brings a warmth to the difficult events that makes us want to share them with father and son.