

RTE 333 PICTURES

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TITLE: Little Miss Sunshine

WRITER: Michael Arndt

GENRE: Comedy

DATE: March 26, 2014

COVERED BY: Erin Roberts

BUDGET: (low, med, high)

LOCATIONS: Suburban Maryland, US highways, a hospital, a Florida hotel and beach

	EXCELLENT	GOOD	FAIR	POOR
PREMISE		X		
STORY		X		
CHARACTERS	X			
DIALOGUE	X			
STRUCTURE	X			
WRITING ABILITY	X			

LOG LINE: An eccentric family embark on a cross-country road trip so the youngest daughter can compete in a children's beauty pageant.

SYNOPSIS: A six year old girl, plump and awkward, OLIVE, sits in front of a TV, intensely focused on an old VHS taping of a Miss America Pageant. She watches the winner's name announced, mimicking her waving and crying. Meanwhile, her father RICHARD gives a mediocre but passionate motivational speech to a community college class a tenth the size of the room's capacity, who clap halfheartedly at his dramatic finish. Olive's mother SHERYL speaks to Richard on her cell phone as she drives to pick up her brother, Olive's uncle FRANK, from a hospital. Frank has attempted suicide by slitting his wrists, and at Sheryl's insistence is staying with Olive's family for awhile. At home, Olive's GRANDPA snorts heroin in the bathroom while her fifteen year-old brother DWAYNE exercises intensely, training for the day he can enlist in the military. He finishes and marks off the day on a calendar hung on the wall next to a giant poster of Nietzsche. These are the Harveys.

At dinner, which consists of a bucket of fried chicken, Frank awkwardly attempts conversation with Dwayne, but Dwayne doesn't speak. In fact, he never does—he's taken a vow of silence until he joins the Naval Academy and becomes a fighter pilot. Grandpa and Olive enter, their rehearsal interrupted by the call for dinner. Olive is going to be in a local beauty pageant, and Grandpa is choreographing her talent performance. Olive innocently asks Frank what happened to his wrists. After some debate from her parents, he explains the he fell in love with one of his grad

students, a boy (to Olive's amusement), who left him for his scholarly rival. They receive a voicemail from Olive's apparent biological father, who Olive stayed with over Spring Break when she won second place in a beauty pageant. The winner of the pageant had backed out, and Olive, as runner-up, is now eligible to compete in the Little Miss Sunshine pageant! ...in Florida. On Sunday. Olive is ecstatic, but the family is at a loss for how to get her to the competition. They decide to drive the VW bus, all of them, to Florida for the weekend.

As they drive, Grandpa speaks in his customarily crude manner. He laments being kicked out of a nursing home, which turns out to be because of the heroin. They stop at a diner, where Olive orders ice cream. Richard explains to her delicately that ice cream can make you fat, and if she eats too much of it, she won't be able to be in beauty pageants. Olive is torn, and when her ice cream comes, decides she doesn't want to eat it. But as the rest of the family begins sharing it, telling her how delicious it is, Olive relents and digs in herself.

In the parking lot, Richard calls his agent STAN, regarding prospective investors in his self-help program, but gets his machine. When they load back into the bus, they find that it won't start. A mechanic tells them that they can still drive the bus, as long as they can get it up to a certain speed before starting it. So, with Richard in the driver's seat, the rest of the family pushes the bus, each one jumping in as it picks up speed, until they finally can continue down the highway. Victory!

Finally, Richard's agent returns his call, but he can't get cell reception on the road. They pull over at a convenience store with a payphone. Frank is going inside to get a drink, and Grandpa asks him to buy him some porn. Inside, and by terrible coincidence, Frank runs into his former grad student/lover, porn magazines in hand. It's excruciatingly awkward. His humiliation is mirrored in Richard, who is on the phone with Stan, grasping at straws. But no luck. He angrily directs everyone back to the bus. They drive in silence, avoiding each other's eyes. Suddenly, Frank points something out... Where's Olive?! She's back at the convenience store, standing awkwardly by the payphone. They pull up, but can't stop. Olive jumps in and they're back on their way.

They stop at a motel for the night. Richard and Sheryl in one room, Frank and Dwayne in another, and Grandpa and Olive in a third. Dwayne listens to his parents fight in the next room. Grandpa tucks Olive into bed, when she admits that she's nervous about the pageant. She doesn't want to be a loser, she says, because her dad hates losers. Grandpa comforts her, telling her the only real losers are the ones who don't try. She's reassured by this and falls asleep, content.

Richard and Sheryl have finished fighting, when Richard suddenly jumps up, vowing to fix this. He bribes some teenagers in the parking lot and borrows their moped, and putts along down the highway toward Atlanta. At a hotel, he confronts Stan. Stan says that he tried, he pushed Richard's program hard, but no one bought it. He storms out, but softens once he's alone. He returns to the motel, defeated.

The next morning, Olive stands next to her parents' bed. Grandpa won't wake up.

At the hospital, they sit in the waiting room. The doctor enters. They did everything they could. An administrator arrives and begins explaining the paperwork, but Richard asks if they could, maybe, leave the body there, then come back after the pageant? The administrator is not having it, so Richard makes a decision. They'll take the body with them. They wrap Grandpa in a sheet and lower him out the window, into the trunk. They're making it to the pageant, no matter what.

They drive—fast. They're barely going to make it. Suddenly a car cuts them off, and Richard honks the horn. And honks it again. And again, and again... The horn is stuck. It keeps sounding intermittently, but there's no time to stop. A state trooper appears behind them almost instantly, and Richard pulls over. The trooper asks him to exit the vehicle and stand by the trunk, but Richard protests. The trooper becomes suspicious, and opens the trunk. He asks Richard to come over... Grandpa's sheet is in plain view, but the trooper is holding the porn magazines from the gas station. Thinking this is what Richard was hiding, the trooper gives him a sly grin and promises not to bust him. And they're on their way again.

Time is running out. The bus cruises down the highway. In the backseat, Olive plays with an eye chart she got at the hospital, testing Dwayne. She gives him a color blindness test—what letter is in the circle? But Dwayne just shrugs. He sees nothing. Frank is crushed, but Dwayne doesn't understand why. Frank explains... Dwayne is colorblind. And you can't fly jets if you're

colorblind. Dwayne pauses, then loses it. They pull over and Dwayne jumps out of the van, screaming obscenities. He's had it, and refuses to get back on the bus. But Olive sits with him for a moment, and he gives in. They push the bus back onto the road.

With five minutes to spare, they make it to the hotel. They drove over a barrier and lost a tire in the parking lot, but they made it. Inside, Miss Florida is signing autographs, and Olive stands in line to meet her. The other girls in the line size her up... and are not impressed. Olive, self-conscious for the first time in her life, finally reaches the front of the line and meekly asks Miss Florida... Does she like ice cream? Miss Florida answers. Of course she does! Olive smiles. She does beauty pageants *and* eats ice cream!

Sheryl helps Olive get ready. The sound guy comes and asks Olive for her music, and she hands him a CD. He looks at it and pauses. Not what he expected. But he leaves with it and Olive continues to prepare for the swimsuit competition. She examines herself in the mirror, uncharacteristically uncomfortable with herself. The pageant begins. Olive sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the tiny, bleach blonde, spray-tanned, career pageant girls. Richard starts to worry this might not be the victory Olive was hoping for.

Richard heads backstage and tells Sheryl that he doesn't think Olive should compete. Sheryl argues, when Dwayne shows up and demands the same thing. Sheryl tells Olive that she doesn't need to compete, and it's okay to sit this one out if she wants to. But as an assistant arrives to escort Olive to the stage for the talent portion, Olive decides to go on.

Olive takes the stage, and the rest of the family waits nervously in the audience. She stands in her pose, and the music begins... It's "Peach" by Prince (or something similar, depending on rights). Everyone is taken aback. Olive dances her heart out, thrusting and shaking and being all sorts of inappropriate for her age and the setting. But Olive is so happy. An official demands that Richard remove her from the stage, and he walks up behind her... and starts dancing! The official is furious, but Richard dances, happily, with his daughter. Frank and Dwayne join in. Sheryl does too, until the whole Harvey family is up on stage, dancing without a shred of self-doubt.

After the pageant, the family sits in the hotel security office, handcuffed together, watching the official complain to police officers. Finally, one exits, telling Richard that the charges have been dropped, but Olive can never enter another pageant in the state of Florida again. Richard assures him it shouldn't be a problem.

On the way home, the stop at a rest stop, eating fried chicken and listening to Richard tell jokes. Everyone laughing, happy, hopeful. They toast Grandpa and finish eating. Richard nods to a snack stand and asks, "Who wants some ice cream?"

COMMENTS: "Little Miss Sunshine" is a heart-warming and hilarious portrait of a modern American family. With its simple premise (characters need to get from point A to point B), each member of the ensemble has room for their own story arc to be well defined and satisfactorily resolved. Sometimes morbid, often inappropriate, and always entertaining, this story is one of the true, relatable tales that make great movies.

Olive, at six years old, is struggling to accept herself at an age where self-doubt and insecurities begin to creep in. All she wants is to please people, especially her father, and to compete in beauty pageants. She's naive and sweet, and a valid motivation for this ragtag group of misfits to all band together and take a road trip, much as they may not want to. Richard is struggling to accept himself too, and has convinced himself so completely that the world is made up of only winners and losers that he can't accept defeat, and doesn't know how to handle disappointment. Frank and Dwayne are the outcasts, Frank being an example to Dwayne of what a life of cynicism and apathy will get you. Sheryl just wants to hold the family together, and Grandpa, in his old age, just wants to get high, have a good time, and see Olive happy.

Despite being somewhat episodic, where some scenes could happen out of order and not necessarily affect the plot, the structure and organization of this script is one of its greatest strengths. Their misadventures on the road start out pretty believable, and are able to escalate to outrageous by the end of the film because we as an audience want to see what else could possibly go wrong, how their luck could get any worse. Richard's disappointment at not being able to sell his self-help program builds to a climax, and just as we're sure he can't get any lower, he learns that his father has died. Suddenly, the quirky comedy has become very sad, almost uncomfortably so. But just in time, we're treated to events so outrageous that we can't help but laugh—they're stealing a body from the hospital! And though they face more setbacks, their luck almost begins to turn around. They get stopped by a highway patrolman, but he doesn't find Grandpa's body in the backseat. They arrive five minutes past the deadline and almost don't get to register for the pageant, but an assistant takes pity on them and puts Olive in the system anyway. And then, finally, we've reached our destination. Olive's on the brink of losing complete confidence in herself, something both her family and the audience dread, as she's been a positive force throughout the entire story. So how, we wonder, will all of this build up finally be paid off? Well, how else but Olive thrusting and gyrating to an incredibly inappropriate song? And when her family joins her, they finally get a glimpse of what it's like to be Olive, never afraid, always hopeful, and incurably happy. Which, really, is all any of them ever wanted.

The ensemble nature of this film provides opportunities for several incredible acting performances, but could present challenges when it comes to casting the part of Olive. Hers is a complex and important character, the portrayal of which could be the difference between a good and an incredible film. The number of casting options would surely increase if you increased Olive's age, but she could quickly lose her charm that way. The casting of Olive might be a challenge, but I believe it is one worth taking on in order to produce this film.

This screenplay is full of witty dialogue and solid, smart laughs. Each comedic moment is earned, and made all the more hilarious because we feel for these characters. It makes all of their mishaps funnier, each of their losses more painful, and every victory that much more triumphant. I believe that this film would receive both critical and commercial success, and is a great opportunity to make a classic film on a relatively low budget. I highly recommend that this script be considered for production.