

# The Florida Project (2017)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 6; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth,  
I therefore command you,*

*'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'*

*Deuteronomy 15:11*

*The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of  
the poor is their ruin.*

*Proverbs 10:15*

I saw director Sean Baker's film right after Stephen Chbosky's [Wonder](#) and was struck by their similarity as well as their stark differences. Both are about families with children, but this is about it for similarities. Wonder's Pullman family are several levels economically and socially above that of six-year-old Moonee (Brooklynn Prince). She lives with her mother Halley (Bria Vinaite), in a three-story cheap motel close to Orlando's Disney World, lodgings that the Pullman family would pass by with disdain. The purple-hued Magic Castle, as it is called, no doubt a knock-off of the nearby Disneyland castle, was built originally for tourists seeking cheaper lodgings than the pricey ones at or next to Disney World. But now it also is home to Halley and Moonee and a few other of societies fringe dwellers unable to muster the large down payment required by apartment landlords.

Early in the summer school break we first see sitting against

a wall Moonee and best friend Jancey (Valeria Cotto), the latter living close by at the rocket-decorated Futureland Inn. The motel's large sign invites travelers to "Stay in the Future Today," but everything about the place points to a far more promising past. Often joined by her friends Scooty (Christopher Rivera) and Dicky (Aiden Malik), the unsupervised Moonee romps in the nearby grassy fields and sometimes create chaos at the Magic Castle, the kids spitting on a car below, putting a dead fish in the swimming pool, dropping water balloons on tourists, disturbing the peace by their shouts and squeals, and one hot day shutting down the motel's electricity. They run past the gift shops selling Disney merchandise and hit on shoppers for spare change so they can buy an ice cream cone at the stand built to look like a giant ice cone. When successful, they pass around their cold prize, each taking their share of licks.

The children are the bane of motel manager Bobby (Willem Dafoe), who is constantly chasing or cleaning up after them. And yet we soon see that he is a softie at heart. He often stops to talk with Moonee, and at one point his watchful eye spots a would-be child predator talking to the children. He quickly hustles the stranger off the premises with a stern warning not to return. The motel owner's policy is not to house any long-term residents, but Bobby knows the financially beleaguered parents have nowhere else to go, so he allows them to stay, covering for them when the owner comes to inspect the place.

Halley is a far cry from Isabel Pullman of *Wonder*. Barely educated, her body extensively tattooed her lower lip pierced, and her hair garishly dyed blue, she had worked as a stripper before being fired for refusing to indulge clients in "extra" services. She is always struggling to raise in time the \$35 a night rent that Bobby always has to wheedle out of her. The mother frequently takes Moonee along to help sell bottles of perfume knock-offs to tourists. To supplement this erratic

income, she occasionally invites a client into her bed while she gets rid of Moonee by having her play in the room's bathtub, filled with floatable toys and foaming bubble bath soap.

The first section of the film, reflecting Moonee's view of their world, is relatively light and sprightly. It reminds us that children are often able to get by despite their poverty because in their innocence they are largely unaware of the larger world beyond their constrained one. The light-heartedness begins to give way when the five children set fire to an abandoned condo. Hitherto their playing had attracted little adult attention, but now the fire department has turned out to fight the large blaze, and the smoke has drawn the motel residents. Scooty's mother Ashley (Mela Murder), suspecting the children caused the fire, forbids her son from playing with Moonee. As a waitress at the orange grove, she had been sneaking out food for Moonee and her mother, but now she cuts it off. Halley fights back, with matters becoming more and more complicated. Her prostituting herself results in Child Services agents and two police officers coming to her motel room. The film soon ends with a surrealistic scene of the deeply disturbed Moonee running away from the agents and seeking out Jancey. The two little girls run and run. The conclusion, involving Disney World, should evoke plenty of discussion as to its meaning. If only it were possible to escape from reality by entering a Magic Kingdom!

Thus, unlike *Wonder*, *The Florida Project* is NOT a feel-good movie. Instead, it is a reality check, reminding us that despite a recent Tweet from on high that America is entering an era of unprecedented prosperity, many Americans are experiencing just the opposite. These are the outsiders looking in. The irony of the motel dwellers living right at the edge of one of the world's major tourist attractions is not pushed, but is evident throughout the film, the camera in close-up showing the name of a street the children pass, such

as "The Seven Dwarfs Lane." In long-shots we see the tourist-catering surroundings as the children walk by such places as a large gift shop decorated by a huge plastic wizard. This is the land of pretense, the kind of pretense that costs a lot of money, which is just what Halley, Moonee, and the others do not have, so they are the excluded in their own homeland.

Although the young children capture our hearts, especially little Brooklyn Prince, it is Willem Dafoe's Bobby whom I end up admiring. No doubt one of the best roles in the actor's illustrious career, his Bobby is a gruff-faced person of grace. He is constantly watching out not just for the disruptive antics of the children, but also for their welfare, as in the case of the threat from the possible pedophile. He sternly lectures Halley about her failed responsibility as a parent, and even though she sasses and insults him in their encounters, he comes to her aid by trying to get her into a nearby motel at a cheaper rate, rather than just kicking her out of his motel after her prostitution makes her persona non grata to the motel residents. Be sure to watch his face during the harrowing sequence in which the Child Services agents and the cops confront Halley with the order take Moonee into custody. It is the picture of sympathy and helpless despair. Without such loving-hearted persons as Bobby, the poor of our society would be even worse off.

This is a good film to see soon after watching *Wonder*. The central character of each film is an outsider, but what a difference their status in society makes! I have no doubt that this will make Visual Parables list of Ten Best Films of 2017.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the December issue of Visual Parables.*