

# We Grown Now



The boys gaze at downtown Chicago, (c) Sony Picture Classics

Writer/director Minhai Baig's elegaic story of an imaginative boy facing the end of a way of life is deeply moving. It makes me believe all the more that the best of films are being made by indepedant filmmakers. This is a must see film.

The setting is the vast Cabrini-Green project that at its height housed up to 15,000 low income residents, mostly Black during the 1990s. Due to a high crime rate and many shootings, the projects became symbolic of urban decay and despair. Baig bucks this view by telling a story of two Black boys, about ten or eleven years-old friends, Malik and Eric (Blake Cameron James and Gian Knight Ramirez), who find much joy and meaning in the increasingly dangerous place. The film does not ignore the white racsim that confines the impoverished people to the project, but this is at the periphery of the boy's' still innocent existence, intruding in just one notable scene.

Their story begins with a black screen. We hear scraping sounds and then the boy's voices, the screen lighting up to reveal the two boys tugging and pushing a discreded mattress through the hallway, letting it fall down the stairways. Outside, they wrestle it along the ground until they come to a couple of other mattresses, atop which they toss this one.

These make up their landing place for their favorite sport, Jumping. The boys are almost always together, spending time at each other's apartments and during weekdays sitting in their classroom at school, Malik in front of Eric.

Each is fortunate in his own way because they have caring families. Malik lives with his younger sister (Amber Avery Holliday), their mother Dolores (Jurnee Smollett) and grandmother Anita (S. Epatha Merkerson). Anita came to Chicago with her husband from Mississippi when their shoe store was torched years ago, She is a fount of wisdom and a major emotional support for her daughter, as well as caregiver for the children. Dolores barely makes enough at her current job, so she is looking for a better position.

Eric lives next door to Malik with his father Jason (Lil Rel Howery) and his older sister Amber (Avery Holliday). Jason is still grieving over the loss of his wife as he tries to guide their two children. In one scene he counts out the money for rent and utilities and asks Eric to do the math in his head, thus making the boy aware of their precarious situation. Later we will see what a wise and caring man he is when he advises his son what he should do when a rift opens up between the two boys.

The boys look out at the Chicago skyline, just a short El ride away, but for them it might as well be a million miles. Malik's imagination provides occasional escape from their dreary surroundings—the two boys lie looking up at the ceiling, stained and covered in cracks. He says look at the stars, and the grungy ceiling dissolves into a night sky of glittering stars, indicating that both friends are caught up in his vision.

One day, while watching a dull Nature film, the two secure permission to go to the bathroom. They rush through the hallway, run out onto the street, and slip under the turnstyle of the nearby El station. They enjoy the sights flying by, and

getting off downtown, they enter the Chicago Art Institute.

This is one of my favorite Chicago sites because it houses Marc Chagall's "White Crucifixion," but it is not this painting that draws the boys. It is a couple of French masterworks, and especially Walter Ellison's painting "[Train Station](#)," that catch their attention. Ellison's work is divided into two parts. On the left, under a sign that reads "South," a number of white travelers, dressed elegantly (one man is even wearing spats), are moving toward a train that will transport them to their vacations. Black porters are carrying their luggage. On the right side Black travelers are about to board a train for the north—as Malik's grandparents had done, seeking better jobs and a less hostile environment. The boys wonder why they are carrying their own luggage. Over a door is a sign that reads "Colored"—Ellison created the painting in 1935 when Jim Crow laws were still in effect.

Not thinking how their sudden urge to escape would affect anyone else, Malik returns home to find his anxious mother greatly relieved—but also upset as she lectures him about his safety. Dolores's anxiety increases when a classmate of her son is killed on the way to school by a stray bullet meant for a gang member. She and her family are not allowed into their home, the security guard informing them that they must get an ID before they will be admitted.

The family attends the boy's funeral. We realize this is not their only time spent in church, as Dolores offers grace before they eat. The shootings and drug use increase, resulting in the most shocking event of the film. In the wee hours of the morning a squad of police invade their apartment as part of a project-wide search for drugs and guns. As the cops empty out the contents of drawers and overturn items, Dolores pleads with the officers to stop, but they shove her aside—several times, while Gran holds the terrified brother and sister. The cops cruelly smash many items—it's as if the Constitution and the Bill of Rights did not exist for this

suspect people!

In seeking a better job Dolores is told by the sympathetic employment clerk that the only job is in Peoria. She would need to buy a car—out of the question—or move. Dolores at first refuses the job because a move would disrupt their lives, especially the children's. Her mother Anita intervenes, reminding her that she had been faced with a similar decision back in Mississippi. Their moving to Chicago had led to better things.

The news that the family will be moving soon is the cause for the rift in Malik and Erik's relationship. The days go by, and neither seeks out the other. Whether Eric will or will not follow his father's wise advice I will leave for you to discover.

The acting by both the adults and the child actors is superb. Composer Jay Wadley's gentle music enhances well our emotions without manipulating them. Any tear you feel has been well earned by the filmmakers.

This is one of the finest films about childhood friendship and family relationships amidst difficult and dangerous circumstances that I have seen. Centering on two middle school boys, and with the violence in the background, this is a film a family with children can enjoy—and which can lead to questions that can broaden the understanding of all. As I wrote at the beginng, this is "a must see film"!

*This review will be in the May issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.*