

Film

## Joaquin Phoenix and Mike Mills on sincerity in 'C'mon C'mon'

By Jake Coyle

In Mike Mills' "C'mon C'mon," Joaquin Phoenix plays a New York-based radio journalist who, throughout the movie, records interviews with real kids about their lives, asking them questions like, "What scares you?" and "What makes you happy?"

During the film's making, Mills would schedule the interviews sporadically, often at the end of a day of shooting.

"It was a constant reminder of what being genuine was in front of the camera, to really be authentic," Phoenix says. "They just were."

"It kind of changed the chemistry all the way through," says Mills. "All films should have to do that."

Moments of documentary make cameos in "C'mon C'mon," but the entire film pulses with something tenderly close to real life. The performances are loose and often improvised. The story, of an uncle (Phoenix) thrust into parenting his sister's 9-year-old son (Woody Norman), was inspired by Mills' relationship with his own child, Hopper.

"I always tell Hopper that a human being is huge," says Mills, who's married to the filmmaker Miranda July. "All the possibilities and contradictions are enormous. A film about human beings, if you're lucky, you're going to get, like, a sliver."

The black-and-white "C'mon C'mon," which a24 opened in theaters last Friday, may be the rare film to do a touch better than that. Since its launch earlier this fall at the Telluride and New York Film festivals, "C'mon C'mon" has been received as an uncommonly sweet, open-hearted and genuine film, a shaggy portrait of

profound adult-child connection.

In October, Phoenix and Mills gathered on a midtown balcony to discuss the film, shot in January 2020 just before the pandemic began and edited throughout it. In the interim, Phoenix became a father. Last year, he and Rooney Mara had a boy, River, named after Phoenix's late brother.

"It was like every phase of life was compounded into a few short months," says Phoenix, smiling. "Life and death. Welcome to the experience!"

Asked if Phoenix began "C'mon C'mon" knowing that fatherhood was coming, he replies, "I don't know. Do the math, man" — before relenting that he did know. But Phoenix, who has always been disinclined to draw straight lines between art and life, cautions it was only an entry point.

Relationship

"When I think about it in relationship to my kid and my experience, I go 'Ugh.' This is so its own thing. I don't want to get into that game of thinking about my life. Was I? I'm sure subconsciously," Phoenix says. "I think it's beautiful when you are inspired by things in your life, but it's also somewhat disgusting at times."

For Mills, the writer-director of "Beginners" and "20th Century Woman," family has been a regular reservoir. "Beginners," with Christopher Plummer, was based on his father, and Annette Bening's matriarch in "20th Century Woman" was inspired by his mother. But he's also hesitant to be too straightforward about it. "Family" sounds too normative to him. He thinks of his subject as

"primary relationships."

"I do feel like the people that show up in your life in a really big way are your cosmos," says Mills. "Everything's there. It's 'Game of Thrones' and 'Spider-Man' and the comedy all thrown together."

"C'mon C'mon" may be built on autobiography but Mills' collaborative process turned it into something else, into its own thing. For Norman, 12, the freedom of Mills' filmmaking was new and transformative.

"I've worked on films that have been very much, 'It has to be in the script and you can't change anything,'" says Norman, speaking by Zoom from his home in London. "It being loose, I thought, let my creativity flow. To me, the film is very charming in that way because you can tell that everything is real."

In the film, Norman's character, Jesse, is full of curiosities and eccentricities that go beyond the usual views of childhood in film. Like Jesse, Norman wants to be taken seriously for all he's capable of.

"I don't want to be seen as a child actor," Norman says. "I want to be seen as an actor who is a child."

Phoenix also began as a child actor, an experience he thinks back fondly on. He believes he was then a fully instinctual actor, a mindset he tries to recapture. For Phoenix, it was moving watching Norman go through something similar in the borderless creative space of "C'mon C'mon."

"Somewhere near the end, he said with no irony, 'I've been carrying you this whole picture.' And I think we all agreed with that," says Phoenix. (AP)

Variety



This image released by Warner Bros. Pictures shows Will Smith, (center), with Demi Singleton, (left), and Saniyya Sidney in a scene from 'King Richard.' (AP)

Film

### Childhood in a turbulent time in nostalgic 'Belfast'

## Tennis comes 2nd in 'King Richard'

By Lindsey Bahr

'King Richard' is exactly what you think it will be, which isn't a bad thing.

This is the story of the father of tennis greats Venus Williams and Serena Williams when they were just a few (extremely) talented kids from Compton trying to break into the elite sport with little more than heart and persistence. Will Smith stars and produced. The Williams family was involved. Beyoncé did an original song. It has "Oscar bait" written all over it.

But the difference between this and your run-of-the-mill "bait," which is too cynical a term to glom onto something that's so sincere, is that "King Richard" is good. It's moving and inspiring, even if it's not exactly inspired. And perhaps most importantly, it doesn't do too much glossy revisionism on behalf of its complicated and flawed central subject. It just lets the contradictions live and the movie, and Smith's performance, are richer for it.

Directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green ("Joe Bell," "Monsters and Men") off a script by Zach Baylin in his first credited screenplay, this is the story of Richard Williams (Smith), a father who, along with his wife Brandy (Aunjanue Ellis), has big plans for his kids. This focus may immediately rub some the wrong way. Why the father and not the tennis superstars? Well, it's an interesting part of two of the best stories in American sports.

Richard, it seems, had a lot of ideas that didn't work out — he was a consummate hustler who always had some business idea brewing. The failures hardly seem to matter though because one idea did work out and that was to get his daughters into tennis. The sometimes humiliating relentlessness in spite of so many rejections and obstacles is easier to watch because we know the end result.

The film does a good job balancing the sports with the story of this family. Richard introduced running drills with the girls, Venus (Saniyya Sidney) and Serena (Demi Singleton), on their run-down courts in South Central Los Angeles. But it's not just sports

greatness that Richard is focused on, he wants his girls to be well rounded humans. Humility and education are just as important. And the girls, for the most part, don't seem to mind the rigor since they believe in the goal as well, though tensions boil over eventually.

Smith is as good as he has ever been as this man who has clearly been beaten down, literally and figuratively, in life but isn't going to let that get in the way of him helping his girls achieve excellence. He lets his movie-star shine dim ever so slightly and disappears into Richard, a guy who we really believe would be so easily dismissed by so many.

Both girls, by the way, are terrific, although Sidney as Venus gets more time to shine just by nature of the story.

The main problem with "King Richard's" long runtime is that by the first hour you may be crawling out of your skin wanting to get up and do something... anything. And you don't get that kind of motivation from just any sports biopic.

There are, hopefully, still many stories left to be told about the phenom of the Williams sisters. But "King Richard" is a very good start.

"King Richard," a Warner Bros. release in theaters and on HBO Max Friday, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "brief drug references, a sexual reference, some violence and strong language." Running time: 148 minutes. Three stars out of four.

If you didn't know Kenneth Branagh's new film "Belfast" was based (somewhat) on his own childhood, you probably wouldn't know it by the end either. That's a good thing.

This isn't a portrait of the artist as a young man. We see a love for theater and cinema, but no nascent Shakespeare affinities or even performative tendencies. In "Belfast," set in 1969, Buddy (Jude Hill) is just a normal kid living in the Northern Island city with his ma (Caitriona Balfe), pa (Jamie Dornan),

brother (Lewis McAskie) and grandparents (Judi Dench, Clárán Hinds) during "the Troubles."

It's a child's-eye perspective of a complex time, when neighborhood streets turned into war zones, and kids were left wondering how they were supposed to tell whether someone was Catholic or Protestant or remember where the no-go zones were.

Yet "Belfast" is no gritty drama. The Troubles are merely a backdrop to this nostalgic crowd-pleaser, filmed lovingly in crisp, clear black and white (by cinematographer Haris Zambarloukos) and set to upbeat Van Morrison music. And it's going to be catnip for some audiences and infuriating to others, who may equate the glossiness with superficiality.

The Van Morrison soundtrack is a case in point. His songs are famously overused in films to the point where they've become cliché. But there is thought behind this choice, too — they are contextually appropriate, being from the era and the place where the film is set despite some convenient squishiness on years. It's Branagh's memory, though, and a film, not a historical document. He can be as squishy as he wants with his facts and garnishes. "Belfast" is imbued with an idealized wistfulness fitting for someone who is telling a story about a home he left when he was only 9 years old.

Besides, "Belfast" is about the authentic feeling of family rather than the particulars. In this way, the movie lives or dies by the actors bringing that to life. Thankfully, Branagh's cast hits it out of the park. Balfe and Dornan may be a bit romanticized as the most attractive parents in the world, but they make their relationship — the good and the bad — come alive through Buddy's loving eyes. Hinds, too, is perfect as the tinkering grandfather who is always ready with advice and wisdom for young Buddy. And then there's Buddy himself. Newcomer Jude Hill is so natural and true that you almost forget that you're watching a performance. It's not an understatement to say that his brilliance makes "Belfast" sing. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: Kevin Spacey and his production companies must pay the studio behind "House of Cards" more than \$30 million because of losses brought on by his firing for sexual misconduct, according to an arbitration decision made final Monday.

A document filed in Los Angeles Superior Court requesting a judge's approval of the ruling says that the arbitrators found that Spacey violated his contract's demands for professional behavior by "engaging certain conduct in connection with several crew members in each of the five seasons that he starred in and executive produced House of Cards."

MRC, the studio behind "House of Cards," had to fire Spacey, halt production of the show's sixth season, rewrite it to remove Spacey's central character, and shorten it from 13 to eight episodes to meet deadlines, resulting in tens of millions in losses, the document said. "The safety of our employees, sets and work environments is of paramount importance to MRC and why we set out to push for accountability," MRC said in a statement Monday.

A representative for Spacey did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment. His attorneys argued that the actor's actions were not a substantial factor in the show's losses.

The ruling came after a legal fight of more than three years and an eight-day evidentiary hearing that was kept secret from the public, along with the rest of the dispute.

Spacey appealed the decision to a panel of three more private arbitrators, who found for the plaintiffs, making the decision final, and public, on Monday.

"MRC stood its ground, pursued this case doggedly, and obtained the right result in the end," plaintiff's attorney Michael Kump said in a statement.

The 62-year-old Oscar winner's career came to an abrupt halt late in 2017 as the #MeToo movement gained momentum.

Actor Anthony Rapp, who has appeared in "Rent" on Broadway and film as well as in "Star Trek: Discovery" on television, said Spacey made a sexual advance on him when he was 14 at a party in the 1980s.

At the time, Spacey issued a

statement saying he didn't remember the encounter but apologized.

Several other accusers followed. Some, including Rapp, have filed lawsuits. Independent investigations found widespread sexual harassment of those who worked under him. (AP)

MONTPELIER, Vt: Captain



Spacey



Rapp

Snowpants; Yo Bro, No Snow; and Jennifer Snowpez are among the names that will be on some of Vermont's snowplows this winter.

Vermont school students participated in the state transportation department's Name a Plow contest to come up with names for the snowplows serving their communities. The entries ranged from

"creative and clever, to cute and silly," the agency said.

Participating schools got a visit from their newly named plows this week. One child was so upset she had missed the visit from the snowplow named Super Snow Storm that the driver and plow will visit again, said Amy Tatko, spokesperson for the Vermont

Agency of Transportation.

Colorado, Michigan and Minnesota have also had contests to name snowplows.

The full list of the Vermont names — including Snowbegone Kenobe, Plowy McPlowFace, Br-r-rito and Steve — can be found on the transportation department's website. (AP)