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Hallmark hits a home run with 'A Smile as Big as the Moon'

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jan. 27, 2012 NCR Today

'A Smile as Big as the Moon'
9 p.m./8 p.m. central, Sunday, Jan. 29, ABC
8 p.m./7 p.m. central, Saturday, Feb. 4, The Hallmark Channel

In the universe of film and television reviewers, it can get really awkward when trying to talk about the elusive, fragile, frequently manipulated "family" genre. No one can really define a family TV film except in hindsight, I think. When television studios set out to make an "all-in-one" family film, they usually end up reaching fewer viewers than hoped for.

It is also impossible to judge a film or television movie as "good" by what it does not have: no sex, bad language, violence, drugs, etc. Most television family films are just bland or worse yet, bland and preachy because producers favor message over a story.

But here comes Hallmark Hall of Fame with its first film of the year, and I think it is their best love story -- ever. It's not only a good family film -- it's great. The bar has been set. I now have a baseline to judge made-for-TV family films.

"A Smile as Big as the Moon" takes place in the late 1980s in Grand Rapids, Mich. It is based on the true story and book by a then high school football coach and special education teacher Mike Kersjes (John Corbett). He and his co-teacher Robynn (Jessy Schram) take the students on their first field trip of the school year, and it is a disaster. One kid says something and it sets off a chain reaction. Each student has different issues: ADD, OCD, ADHD, autism, Down syndrome, dyslexia, low IQs and others conditions, or combinations of them. Kersjes has been teaching special needs kids for 10 years, and he's thinking of a change.

As the teachers lead the students to the bus to return home, Ben, who has Down syndrome (Peter ten Brink in his third movie), grabs a handful of brochures about Space Camp. Kersjes confiscates them and tells the students that one brochure is enough. But one of the other kids took some, too, and the seed is planted. The students want to go to Space Camp, and Mr. Kersjes decides to take them.

Space Camp takes place at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Ala. Although the principal (E. Roger Mitchell) turns down Kersjes' idea, the teacher calls for information. Alas, Space Camp does not have a program for special needs students, but eventually, the director invites the ever-persistent Mike to send a proposal. Mike's wife (Moira Kelly) is not sure where this is going, but when the director invites Mike to send a proposal and then invites him and Robynn to visit, Mike realizes how difficult it will be to prepare the students for the rigorous curriculum that simulates a flight into space, as well as to raise the required $50,000.

Space Camp gives the OK, Mike and Robynn dedicate themselves to modifying some of the activities, and they all begin a year of preparation and fundraising.

Here's what is so remarkable and magical about this TV movie: The casting of the students by veteran Molly

Lopata is stellar. Whether the actors really have learning challenges or play kids who have them, they give terrific performances and interact and play off of one another perfectly. The director, James Stephen Sadwith, and his crew deserve credit for integrating such a diverse cast. I also want to give a nod to cinematographer Roy H. Wagner. I hardly ever notice camera work in a made-for-TV movie, but here, Wagner shows great skill by letting us see the emotions of the characters through close-ups that in other hands might have been overdone. John Corbett, usually a romantic lead, is so at home in his role that he makes you think he's been a teacher all his life.

Last year, President Barack Obama canceled the NASA moon program as well as the space shuttle program, leaving 9,000 people unemployed. On Jan. 25 on NPR's "Talk of the Nation," host Neal Conan and guests considered the future of the space program and the talk about privatizing it [1].

Although the U.S. government's interest in some aspects of space travel has greatly diminished, the stars still fascinate students and the Center continues to offer eight different programs on three different tracks. The real Mike Kersjes has raised enough money to send 3,000 special needs children to Space Camp over the years.

"A Smile as Big as the Moon" is being released as the U.S. Space and Rocket Space Center [2] celebrates its 30th anniversary. (It is also the rocket scientist and space architect Werhner Von Braun's 100th birthday on March 23.) However, the story has taken years to come to the screen, passing through Disney and other studios before landing at Hallmark Hall of Fame.

"A Smile as Big as the Moon" is a valentine to teachers, parents, schools, and especially to special needs students. The film addresses bullying, teamwork, leadership, perseverance, all kinds of learning styles and character with a deft touch. It is filled with humor, courage, sorrow and hope. It is a celebration of the human family reaching for the moon and wishing on a star.

In true Hallmark fashion, it has a BK rating -- bring Kleenex. But I felt so drawn into the students' experience and their victories, big and small and in between, that I just enjoyed the love in "A Smile as Big as the Moon" -- and I am still smiling.

Click here for a brief news story about the making of "A Smile as Big as the Moon." [3]

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