

Tom, Thanks for Nothing in Common

January 29, 2020

NOTHING IN COMMON (1986)

Directed by Garry Marshall

Written by Rick Podell & Michael Preminger

Starring Jackie Gleason, & Tom Hanks as David Basner

It was clear at an early age that sports would not be the thing over which my father and I would bond. I entertained an obligatory Trading Card phase at ten, to which he served as a useful council, but those days faded for me a lot faster than they did for my younger brother, who in fact still enjoys a little sporting spectatorship when he can find the time; he's a math genius and statistics are never more exciting than through the lens of the on-going wars that are golf tours, game-sevens, and round robins. And yes, my dad also loves the sports. He'll often have one of the 366 major annual sporting finales on mute over Sunday dinner, then scurry off to catch what's left, publicizing an invitation to join. But it's never much interested me. I can enjoy a live sporting event, sure, because I like lite beer and shrieking the hooky parts of *Dirty Deeds, Done Dirt Cheap*. And that's enough! Sometimes you have to search to find an indirect way to connect over the interests of someone you love. In spite of the fact that the ground isn't always obviously common, you can be close to anyone.

In 1986's *Nothing In Common*, the struggle between a father and son to connect is especially real. TH's David Basner and his father Max (Jackie Gleason) appear to share no mutual ground. Max is an unreliable, emotionally distant shyster, whose recently been left by his wife and fired from his job. David is an advertising wunderkind, silver-tongued and accomplished. He views himself as having eclipsed the life of mediocrity that once haunted him, but when his father comes around with predictable moans of victimhood, David attempt to tolerate the routine. He gives one final crack at a relationship when it's revealed Max is, in fact, very sick.

If this was simply a film about the difficulty had between a parent and child to relate, I could accept the valiently personal effort. Granted, we have more poignant interpretations of this conflict in films like *Lady Bird*, *The Squid & The Whale*, and *Mary Poppins*. But *Nothing In Common* struggles most to have a singular premise, and while it's clear early on that David and Max are more similarly withdrawn than they realize, there are additional subplots featuring David's starting-from-scratch mother (Eva Marie Saint), and his soulmate-turned-BFF (Bess Armstrong), which bloat the movie into a state of dissaray. Despite this, it's probably a deeply personal, if not directly autobiographical story, but the writer of the original treatment clearly thought he was making *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and it's just not up to that standard.

I know Jackie Gleason is an icon of patriarchal entertainment figures, an essential posterboy for marital dysfunction, but my touchstone for his role in the conciousness has always been a **joke from *Back to the Future***, wherein he represents the old tradition of television; notably, this is a movie that came out one year *before* *Nothing In Common*. So, even in 2020, I struggle to see how his casting isn't glaringly anachronistic. Helpfully, with breathy, sythesized power ballads, and clashing shirt-tie combos, the rest of the movie is too. For me, at least. As I understand it, Gleason's performance was well-received, and the film elevated TH to the status of a dramatically-capable thespian. Where now it's a reach to imagine him as a sleezy playboy, at the time, it was strange to imagine him as anything but a whacky comedy actor.

Though it provided a rare opportunity to watch a movie with completely blind expectations, the fact that I'd never once heard of this film leads me to wonder how exceptional it ever was. But it's possible I haven't lived long enough to share the thesis that, over time, we come to parent our parents, all the while continuing to grow ourselves. I'm still powerfully reverent of my folks, and dependent on them too. I guess, like anyone, we have some ideological differences (probably not many), but this is only loomed into richness because of, not only our mutual respect, but mutual *interest* in each others' interests.

My best example of why *Nothing In Common* is not the movie for me, comes from memories of 2012. On a family vacation in Florida, my dad and brother went to a Tampa Bay Lightning game. These tickets are expensive, and a taste for arena beer and rock hooks didn't render me elligible; I've always understood this. But we scrambled to off-set it with a bonding experience better suited to my interests, and briefly entertained going to see the Charlie Sheen live tour (this was in the heat of Tiger Blood Mania). It happened to be nearby, and I'm the celebrity-afficianado,

but we ultimately chose against it because it felt grubby. We returned home and, soon they announced a Bruce Springsteen concert just a few hours away. This is *way* more my speed than Charlie Sheen, and it was probably a better match for dad also, but he'd never been, like, the world's biggest Boss fan. Still, I asked him to go with me, and he immediately bought us tickets. He did all the driving, bought all the gas, got us lunch, bought me the t-shirt, and one for himself. He even offered to buy me the Wrecking Ball LP from the merch tent. I said, "No, dad. That's really okay!" I didn't need it, I was at the live show. I also didn't want to have to lug around a big record all day. But he was so determined to make it the best day of my life that he didn't seem to realize it already was.

These days, if you ask my dad who his favourite artist is, he'll probably say Springsteen. And I'll watch the final putt with him, if he asks. Whether we like it or not, it's impossible to have nothing in common with our dads. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Thx!