Mitch's look at each of the five contenders for Best Picture of the Year continues tonight with his review of "Little Miss Sunshine", a film about a disfunctional family that travels cross country to enter their seven year old little girl in a national beauty pageant out in California. For this review, Mitch channels our Cavs beat guy John Hnat, he of the wildly popular "The Good, The Bad, & The Summary". Enjoy.

I'll be honest; this movie is being reviewed now strictly because it is nominated for Best Picture. It was released during the summer to critical acclaim and respectable box office receipts for an Indie film. It came out on DVD a few months ago and is now back in the public eye due to it's role as a Dark Horse favorite to win the award.

Since I didn't catch this film at the theater, I thought I'd do something a little different. They say that imitation is the highest form of flattery, so John Hnat better be real flattered by this (more than likely real embarrassed).

Little Miss Sunshine: The Good, The Bad, & The Summary

THE SUMMARY:

Lots of people have fallen in love with this charming (their words, not mine) road trip comedy that follows the exploits of a dysfunctional family that makes the Jacksons downright normal in comparison. Albuquerque beauty pageant addict Olive, the first runner up in a local 10 and under competition, has just learned that the winner had to drop out, and now Olive will be able to compete in California for the title of Little Miss Sunshine. What follows is a whacked out journey as the entire family boards a decrepit banana yellow VW bus and bumbles their way across the Southwest, bonding with each other and learning about themselves as they head towards the prototypical Child Pageant From Hell.

WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE MOVIE:

Mute, Nietzsche-loving Emo: Olive's big brother Dwayne has taken a vow of silence until he gets accepted into the Air Force Academy. Despite the limitations placed upon the character by this bizarre trait, Paul Dano does a wonderful job in making him the most normal one of the bunch. The kid has got some brains and a ton of common sense, and it's enjoyable to watch him roll his eyes with disgust at his clueless parents' actions. Paul Dano has a future as an actor.

Heroin Snorting Grandpa: Simply put; Alan Arkin steals this movie, and I would much rather see him take home the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor rather than the one-note, over the top performance by Eddie Murphy in "Dreamgirls". Grandpa (they never give him a name) fought in WWII and is now at the point where he's done enough in life that he no longer gives a damn what anyone thinks of him. He's thrown out of the retirement home for his drug use and womanizing, so he now has a room at his son's house, where he acts as mentor to young Olive. Foul mouthed, cantankerous, and dead-spot on accurate with his zingers towards his irrational family, Arkin is the type of old fart any one of us would love to spend some time with.

Steve Carell Can ACT!: Unlike the man he often works with, Will Ferrell, Carell excels in a very straight role in a comedy; allowing the laughs to come from the circumstances and not the manic behavior. He plays Uncle Frank, Sheryl's younger brother, a Proust Scholar just released from the mental hospital after a failed suicide attempt following a broken relationship with a fellow male professor and the loss of his job and professional reputation. But Frank is

not a crazy person, just an extremely intelligent man caught up in absurd circumstances who doesn't have enough real life experience to know how to handle it all. This may make his character and actions sound morose, but Carell deftly ends up making him hilarious...adding just a touch of pathos to a geeky guy whose main fault is too much optimism and hope. All of this makes him the perfect complement to his nephew Dwayne, and the interactions between the two of them are the highlights of the movie.

More Chemistry Than a Motorcycle Gang's Trailer Park: First time movie directors Jonathan Dayton and Valier Faris (husband and wife) struck gold with this cast, even the ones that I'll rip in the next session (just because I don't like the characters doesn't mean that the actors aren't good). This type of ensemble film depends not just on memorable characters, which it obviously has, but also in the actors working well together in addition to making the characters stand out as individuals. All the intricate nuances of a dysfunctional family come through loud and clear...and sometimes subtly and clear.

WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT THE MOVIE:

Daddy's a Jerk: I'm not really sure why writers always fall back on the old comedy crutch of making the father of the family out to be a complete idiot. No exception here. Greg Kinear's Richard isn't a sad sack loser; he's a dislikable used car salesman level annoying know-it-all loser. Richard is a motivational speaker, but as far as I could tell, his "nine step program" could only motivate someone to do like Frank and slit their wrists. You pretty much spend 90% of the movie just wanting to bitchslap him, and even in the few moments of relative tenderness, it still rings as hollow, like it's something he's doing only to further his needs.

Toni Collette Hasn't Been Underutilized This Much Since "The Sixth Sense": Collette is a terrific actress, and she is perfect in every scene in which she has anything to do other than panic...so why weren't there more of them? Her Sheryl is a woman who knows she settled for less than she deserved, and her icy glares and deep sighs cut to the very core of her fractured marriage. But she is given so little screen time due to excessive scenes with Richard that we miss out on what could have been a much better storyline.

W.C. Fields Was Right: "Never act with kids or animals", the Great One said...and he is spot on with young Abigail Breslin as Olive. I'm sorry...this is the worst Best Supporting Actress nomination that I've ever seen. While Abigail is quite cute in her role, there is no real acting going on...just some jumping around with the look and energy of a child after she had a pound of Skittles and a two liter bottle of Mt. Dew Code Red. Anna Paquin in "The Piano" or Tatum O'Neal in "Paper Moon" she ain't. And that scream was enough to drive a man to make an immediate appointment for a vasectomy.

National Lampoon's Vacation Rip-Offs: If you've seen the movie, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, I don't want to give it away. Let's just say that it was a cheap, unnecessary, and lazy stunt that detracted greatly from the movie.

Stupid Endings - They Aren't Just for Fans of Cleveland Sports: I liked the idea of exposing Child Pageants for the grotesque freak shows that they are. Any parent pushing their little JonBenet's into these things should be beaten to a bloody pulp with a Barbie Doll. However, the movie totally went off the reservation with the last scene. Embarrassingly stupid.

The Hype: Everyone is making this out to be another "Sideways" or "The Full Monty"...a low profile independent film that is one of the best films of the year. It isn't.

WHAT LIES AHEAD:

My rating...which is a Kelly Holcomb (2 footballs). Not a bad DVD rental, but not what it's cracked up to be. Frankly, I was tempted to give it a Tim Couch (1 1/2), just because I am so sick of the hype. But the movie isn't THAT bad...just that over-rated.