

## Nebraska

Two years ago, director Alexander Payne won an Oscar for Best Screenplay for “The Descendants,” shot in contemporary Hawaii. For his latest, “Nebraska,” he is back again in his home state with his sardonic portrait of a Midwestern curmudgeon. I happen to be a big Payne fan, but, for me, “Nebraska”—while very good—does not quite match his earlier achievements.

Payne has used his home state (he’s from Omaha) in several movies (“Citizen Ruth,” “Election,” and “About Schmidt”). Here he has returned with a rough-hewn story (from a script by Bob Nelson) about an addled Nebraskan (Bruce Dern) on a fool’s errand-cum-road trip to procure a sweepstakes prize.

Woody Grant (Dern), from small-town Nebraska but now living in Montana, believes that he is a millionaire “WINNER!” after receiving a sweepstakes mailing. To receive his prize, he must return to the Mega-Sweepstakes Marketing Company in Lincoln, Nebraska. His wife Kate (June Squibb), a tart-tongued fireball, thinks he’s nuts, but his mild-mannered son, David (Will Forte) agrees to humor him and drive him to Woody’s tiny home town of Hawthorne, where he has extended family members.

Once in Hawthorne, Woody runs up against his messy past, including a passel of taciturn relatives, nosy neighbors, and an old nemesis, Ed Pegram (Stacey Keach). Word of his status as a “millionaire” spreads and, along with sincere congratulations, hands are out (especially Ed’s) to claim a piece of Woody’s bounty. Kate and David, along with Woody’s other son, Ross (Bob Odenkirk), all try to convince him that he is the victim of a scam, but he cannot let go of his prize form letter and its promise of riches. David gently tries to dissuade him but eventually chauffeurs him all the way to Lincoln for his payoff.

This shaggy dog story has a Don Quixote flavor, but we are not in La Mancha, but rather the low-slung, wind-swept contours of Nebraska itself, shot in a sometimes luminous, sometimes dingy black-and white (Phedon Papamichael’s cinematography is often radiant). Payne keeps the pace dogged, rather like Woody’s shambling, uncertain gait, while Nelson’s script spices up the naturalistic, laconic exchanges of the locals with occasional outbursts (usually from Kate) and comic set pieces. The best of the latter, a beautifully staged pilfering of a compressor, plays out at length, and reveals not only the nature of the Grant family itself but something of prairie protocol.

The cast, both principals and walk-ons, is top drawer. Keach’s Ed is a wily bastard, and Forte’s David is kind and sensible, miles away from the comic turns he did on “Saturday Night Live.” Squibb’s bristling June gets all the best lines—many mocking her husband—thus confirming why Woody has become such a taciturn mope. And a passel of character parts, including a pair of car-obsessed cousins, are deftly played.

The principal reason I feel that “Nebraska” is not quite up to the quality of Payne’s last films is the nature of his lead, 77-year-old Bruce Dern as Woody. Dern, unsteady of pace, grizzled of aspect, is a dominant presence but, for this critic, not an interesting one. A leaden alcoholic of few and crass words, he appears just this side of senile, and the fact that he can’t sense an obvious scam just seems unbelievable. His gullibility, though, produces a great line, when David tells a sweepstakes staffer: “He

doesn't have Alzheimer's; he just believes what people tell him," but he seems just too far gone. It is a showy performance, already winning critics' accolades, but it is also a little bit too easy.

Another mild detriment to the film is its treatment of some of the Nebraska denizens. Payne is famous for giving his often unassuming Midwest characters surprising and unexpected dimensions. Here, too often, he appears to be playing the "hick" card, given to easy clichés about small town boobs. I will chalk up these lapses to the fact that, for the first time in his career, Payne did not write or co-write his own script.

Not to carp too much, for "Nebraska" is still worthwhile and much of the reality of small-town Midwest life is nicely captured. The film, too, has a particularly lovely and gratifying ending.

*(The film is rated "R" for saucy language and runs 115 min.)*

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