

The Sum of Us

An anxious parent desires what's best for his kid, and especially wants to set the child up with the right partner. The fact that it's a father who's concerned about his son's love life might make such a tale slightly unusual, but it still bears the marks of facile soap opera or sitcom. The new Australian film, *The Sum of Us*, presents just this plot line, but with a twist: Dad is trying to find "Mr. Right" for his gay son.

Based on David Stevens's play of the same name, *The Sum of Us* has elements all too familiar from other domestic comedies of stage and screen, yet it is able to avoid formula through a smart script which keeps overturning expectations and two full-bodied lead performances which counter cliché.

Widower Harry Mitchell (Jack Thompson) is a Sydney boat captain who is a wholly hetero bloke who wants only what's best for his son, Jeff (Russell Crowe), a plumber who happens to be gay. Father and son live together, and, while they get on each other's nerves, they still are best buddies and tell each other everything. Harry is the kind of guy who can lift a brew with his son with the salute "Up your bung" and who aches to find a companion for him, even bringing home men's porno mags to "get him started." Homosexuality is not unknown in the family: in flashbacks, Jeff tells us about the loving relationship his gran had with her lover Mary.

Harry, acting like a fussy mum, can't help butting into his son's relatively chaste love life, including looking in on Jeff dallying with his new boyfriend, Greg (John Polson), a gardener whose parents don't understand his proclivities at all. Harry, meanwhile, also has companionship on his mind and clicks with Joyce (Deborah Kennedy), a divorcee he meets through a dating service. Joyce is immediately taken with Harry, a funny and forthright, yet tender, wooer, but she learns little about son Jeff.

Things just don't mesh. Greg gingerly turns Jeff away, put off by this strange relationship with his father which is so different from his own. He is later thrown out of the house when his dad learns he is gay. Joyce learns inadvertently (through stumbling upon the porno magazines) of Jeff's sexual orientation and walks out on Harry, not so much because of the son's gayness as because of the father's lack of openness in not telling her. Harry, distraught, suffers a stroke. In its wake, mute and wheelchair bound, Harry is an almost total invalid. Here, the screenplay spins expectations around again, as the straight character, rather than the gay one (in this day of AIDS) is the one taken ill, the one who needs constant care.

So summarized, this may not seem much of a comedy, but, in fact, it is. The play was an Off-Broadway success in 1990 and its screen version won the equivalent of an Australian Oscar for Stevens last year. The story has something of the comic sentimentality of American plays like "Prelude to a Kiss" or "Da" but also elements of a character study like Willy Russell's "Shirley Valentine." The comparison with the latter work is particularly apt, because *The Sum of Us*, like "Valentine," offers both the weather-beaten but hopeful perspective of its lead character and the same theatrical device of that character directly addressing the audience.

The latter device, as used by co-directors Kevin Dowling and Geoff Burton, seems perfectly natural and acceptable in the film version (both Harry and Jeff use it),

but it falters once. Lying inert on his bed in his post-stroke phase, Harry suddenly leans forward to tell us his thoughts, just as he's done before. Breaking out of his character's confines this way is funny--at first--but the fact that he continues to do it shatters the illusion of poignancy we are supposed to feel for Harry. Film--a far more realistic medium than drama--cannot take this kind of dichotomy. Every shot of immobile, invalid Harry offers the possibility of a one-liner, and the film loses some of its force and wit because of it.

Which doesn't mean Messrs. Thompson and Crowe aren't stellar throughout. Jack Thompson, first seen by American audiences as the fighting defense attorney in *Breaker Morant* (to which Stevens also contributed the screenplay), is every good-hearted fella you wanted to share a beer with. A spirited yet sweet man, you know why Jeff loves him and why Joyce is attracted to him. As much as any decent dad, he has accepted his son's nature and the fact that his seed will not be further propagated. Our children, after all, per Harry's conviction, "are only the sum of us." Yet you understand his plaintive (and very funny) shock and never-say-die hope during one scene when Jeff offhandedly admits he's "had it off" with some women--just to experience it. The dreams of a dutiful father die hard.

Crowe, introduced on this side of the Pacific as a priest/gunfighter in the recent cartoonish Sam Raimi Western *The Quick and the Dead*, embodies an amiable and anxious young man who just wants one person "to talk to and cuddle." He contradicts nicely the stereotype of a ravenously promiscuous homosexual who belongs to a "gay scene." In an interview, writer Stevens conceived of him as a young man "who is happy with his social milieu" and wants "to be accepted for what he is within his own domestic life." Crowe's Jeff is a "one-man man" who wears his gayness most calmly and matter-of-factly.

Getting down to it, that may be the most heartening thing about *The Sum of Us* : its matter-of-fact acceptance of homosexuality. The sexual angle certainly *does* give the story most of its piquancy and humor; its presence is the fulcrum of the plot, yet this film is more than that. It is a droll "Father and Son" with family values foremost. (*"The Sum of Us" is unrated but it contains sexual situations and English--and Aussie--obscenities.*)

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