

My Life

A feisty, successful LA public relations hot-shot learns that (1) his wife is pregnant with their first child, and (2) he is dying of inoperable cancer. He decides that he will, to grossly paraphrase T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, measure out his life in videoclips. He begins to videotape vagrant thoughts addressed to a future child he may or may not ever see. In doing this exercise, he inevitably begins a process of reexamining his own life. This is the operating premise of Bruce Joel Rubin's *My Life*, a decent, if conventional, Hollywood product which will probably merit a night out for some film fans, especially young couples.

The film begins with PR-man Bob Jones (Michael Keaton), already aware of his disease, has begun to tape his video legacy. Part of his past is buried: he has disowned his working-class family and upbringing in Detroit. He has changed his name from the Ukrainian Ivanovich and has become "a product of his own PR." His kindly and very supportive wife (Nicole Kidman) is more in touch with his family than he is. The film's argument follows a kind of parabolic arc as Bob first discovers a Chinese healer (Haing S. Ngor) who can "sense" his cancerous organs. He then returns to Detroit to witness the marriage of his brother (Bradley Whitford) and later confronts his greatest childhood fear by riding a giant roller coaster. The high point of this arc is the birth of baby Brian, which Bob is able to witness. Domestic life is bliss until the cancer invades his brain, and he becomes ever more immobile, ever weaker until he slides into death. Through all of this, he tapes himself, his surroundings, his hopes for the child.

Keaton displays some of the familiar mildly sneering, wise guy persona he has shown in earlier pictures but leavens this with genuine humor (especially in his clever video clips), honest wonder in watching his baby's birth, and some affecting moments as he stumbles towards his end. He shows real acting range in moving from frustration over his fate to reasoned--if not serene--acceptance of it. Kidman is a luminous presence (one can understand Bob's anguish in leaving her) who avoids the cliché of the "martyred wife," especially when she screams bloody hell at her video-obsessed husband to stop taping her delivery. Bob's parents, the Ivanoviches (Michael Constantine and Rebecca Schull) sound and look right, resentful of yet still tied to their disaffected son.

My Life is one of those "feeling good about feeling bad" movies, handling terminal illness rather as *Terms of Endearment* did just a decade ago. Rubin (who wrote the original screenplay) pulls on all sorts of manipulative strings for the audience but also shows he can practice restraint and calm in depicting a terminal case--although that does not mean that folks won't be sniffing and drying eyes at its finale.

Much of *My Life* is too easily summed up in pop psych phrases like "learn to take risks in life," "don't forget your roots," or "live one day at a time." In fact, the movie's advertising plugs the film that way, urging audiences to "let go of your anger" and make sure that "every moment counts." Yet the conventionality of the film is redeemed enough by some heartfelt scenes, some occasions of wit, and some unaffected acting. Predictable? Yes; utterly formulaic? No. Sentimental? Yes; totally cornball? No.

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