

# The Pursuit Of Happiness: The American Dream as White, Rich and All Male

By Prairie Miller

WBAI Arts Magazine

Arts Magazine Online

Functioning shrewdly as both Hollywood assembly line wish fulfillment and admonishment of anyone who isn't gullible enough to fall for this urban tall tale, *The Pursuit Of Happiness* quite typically draws its energy from the exception rather than the rule. In this case, it's Will Smith as a down and out homeless man who rises above, or rather flees his station in life among the Black and poor, to dwell in the white man's stock market heaven. An Escape Artists Production, indeed.

*The Pursuit Of Happiness* is based on the 1980s Greed Decade rags to riches life story of homeless guy turned stock broker multi-millionaire Chris Gardner, or at least the parts of his life that he and the filmmaker, Gabriele Muccino, choose to share with us. Will Smith as Gardner is a San Francisco bottom feeder itinerant salesman hawking dubious contraptions to medical facilities around town. Failing fairly miserably to make ends meet and to provide for his increasingly frustrated shrewish blue collar working wife Linda (Thandie Newton) and preschooler son Christopher (played by Smith's own son, Jaden), Gardner eventually ends up penniless.

When Linda announces she's leaving him and headed to New York, Gardner insists on custody of their son, even though he can barely care for him as he drags the kid between day care and the local men's shelter. And sometimes the subway toilet when nowhere else can be found for the night.

With literally nothing to lose, Gardner bids for a no-wage internship at Dean Witter Associates. And he's granted the gig over a battalion of designer suited white guys, even though he shows up dirty and disheveled after a night in jail for not paying parking tickets. We're supposed to buy the premise that it's Gardner's gift of gab and jokestering that lands him the job. Or is the joke on us?

Now while it's not unheard of to make a fortune overnight on the stock market, neither is it impossible to win millions from the Lottery. The film, with its blatant workingclass contempt and disrespect, would have audiences believe, however, that not doing so is pretty much your own fault, a combination of laziness and lack of motivation. In other words, poverty as self-blame.

The schematically distorted state of affairs is telegraphed to audiences in myriad manipulative ways. Gardner finds only 'Unhappiness' among the poor in his community. They're selfish, dishonest, insensitive and mean, and have much to do with Gardner's bad luck, simply by not caring about him or his plight. Those apparently savior stock market elite, on the other hand, offer Gardner not only enormous opportunity, but affection, serenity, security and generosity. Did I mention that the NY Stock Exchange-SNE News has direct financial ties to SONY Pictures, the studio that concocted this yarn? Either that's sheer coincidence, or the Wall Street benefactors of SONY pictures have crafted quite a cunning promo for themselves, disguised as a movie.

In the interests of coming clean, let's bring this film down to earth for a reality check for a moment. A homeless man wandering around a big city with a preschooler, sleeping in subway toilets and the men's shelter? Not possible on this planet. He'd be stopped before long by the authorities and questioned about child neglect, and either be placed by government social services in a hotel or have the child removed from his custody. Nor would a men's shelter ever admit children into their adult only barracks facilities. But apparently the filmmakers have created a Bush era fantasy world here, where government assistance, particularly when it comes to children, doesn't exist. Or one supposes, needn't exist. The 'private initiative' of the stock market can save you better.

Nor is this film willing to bother considering how those hordes of seemingly repugnant masses ended up that way, and the relationship of that economic inequality to the stock market. Nor the corrupt nature of the brokerage business that exploits and impoverishes people around the world or sucks pension funds dry here, and makes people like Gardner wealthy. Or more to the point, the very few profiteers who make it rich on the market, compared to the many more who lose all their money.

And that Gardner doesn't seem to have anything good to say when it comes to women, is an understatement. There isn't a single positively portrayed female in the entire movie. They're either mean and hateful like his demonized wife, lazy and neglectful day care providers, or hippie street thieves out to rob you. Odd in the extreme, Gardner's utopic vision of America is strictly rich, white and all male. The upscale side of town in *The Pursuit Of Happyness*, whether business or residential, is always beatific and bathed in gleaming light. While the streets where everyday people live, are dark, dingy and dangerous, a bad dream where solo flight, not collective solidarity and resistance, is Hollywood's coping mechanism of choice.

On a side note, in a sort of offensive title sequel to *White Men Can't Jump*, *The Pursuit Of Happyness* implies that *People Of Color Can't Spell*.

Prairie Miller

WBAI Arts Magazine

ArtsMagazine@juno.com