

# In 'The Florida Project,' dreamers toil in the shadow of Disney World



Halley and her 6-year-old daughter Moonee live in a motel that's managed by Bobby, a man whose stern exterior hides a deep reservoir of kindness and compassion. Starring Willem Dafoe, Brooklynn Prince, and Valeria Cotto. Video by Jason H. Neubert.



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**I**n director Sean Baker's "The Florida Project," the happiest place on Earth is really an unmagical kingdom. The setting is the Magic Castle, one of the low-rent **Kissimmee** motels dotting U.S. Highway 192 in the shadow of Disney World where the near homeless struggle to survive. Still, the Magic Castle, a three-story palace with light-purple stucco, is an enchanted place for 6-year-old Moonee (Brooklynn Kimberly Prince), the troublemaking leader of a group of kids who entertain themselves by bilking tourists for ice-cream money. But it's no paradise for Moonee's mother, Halley (Bria Vinaite), nor for the Magic Castle's property manager, Bobby (**Willem Dafoe**).

Much critical acclaim has been heaped on “The Florida Project” ahead of its Miami premiere Sunday, Oct. 15, at the GEMS 2017 film festival at Miami Dade College’s Tower Theater, especially for its vital focus on Central Florida’s hidden homeless population. An early review from Vulture describes Baker’s movie as a “near-perfect film,” while the New York Times says “The Florida Project” avoids the traps of condescension and prurience that ensnare too many well-meaning movies about poverty in America.” The most effusive praise comes from the Atlantic, which calls it “a must-see work — and one of the year’s best films.”

“It’s so ironic that such poverty is adjacent to the happiest place on Earth, the No. 1 amusement park in the world,” says Jaie Laplante, director of the Miami Film Festival and its fall offshoot, GEMS. “Sean wanted to explore this dichotomy, of having the homeless literally down the street from a fantasy land.”

Baker and Price will attend the GEMS screening of “The Florida Project” before it opens in limited theatrical release Oct. 20. Laplante is well aware of its buzz, and its Florida connection calls to mind the success of “Moonlight,” the Miami-set drama that won the award for best picture during February’s Academy Awards.

Asked about the film’s chances for golden statues, Laplante says, “the film is extraordinarily beautiful. I was moved to tears when I saw Willem Dafoe’s performance. He could be heading for a best supporting actor nod. Sean could get one for directing.”

If “The Florida Project” has tough competition during awards season, it may come from the 14 other movies screening at GEMS, which focuses on independent films and Oscar hopefuls.

Luca Guadagnino’s gay romance “Call Me by Your Name,” a standout at the Sundance and Berlin film festivals, will open the festival on Thursday, Oct. 12. Ruben Ostlund’s Swedish film “The Square,” which won the 2017 Cannes Film Festival’s top Palme d’Or prize, stars Elizabeth Moss (“The Handmaid’s Tale”) and **Dominic West** (HBO’s “The Wire”) in a cutting satire of the art world. The French drama “Faces Places,” about a young street artist with an enormous Instagram following, is co-directed by 89-year-old Belgian director Agnes Varda, who will collect an honorary Academy Award on Nov. 11. And producer and director Lili Fini Zanuck, whose “Driving Miss Daisy” won a best picture Oscar, offers the documentary “Eric Clapton: Life in 12 Bars.”

These films will undoubtedly be overhyped and overanalyzed when awards season begins later this fall, Laplante says. Screening them early helps moviegoers cut through the chatter.

“Hype can really mess with your ability to watch a film,” Laplante says. “Your expectations may be skewed. This lets you enjoy these films in a fresher state, to get in on the conversation early and realize, ‘Wow, that film is a masterpiece and it will go all the way.’”

*GEMS will take place Thursday, Oct. 12, through Sunday, Oct. 15, at Miami-Dade College’s Tower Theater, 1508 SW Eighth St., in Miami. Tickets cost \$9-\$13 per film, \$25 for opening-night film and party. Call 844-565-6433 or go to [Gems2017.MiamiFilmFestival.com/program](http://Gems2017.MiamiFilmFestival.com/program).*

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