

Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 108 minutes

This film is available on Hulu for streaming and is also playing at open drive-ins and cinemas.

The term slice-of-life couldn’t be a more accurate description of the events depicted in the new movie, *Nomadland*. For the better part of nearly two hours, the cast and filmmakers attempt to capture the life of a woman living a nomadic lifestyle. The film displays the reasons for making such a choice, as well as the highs and numerous lows, uncertainties, frustrations, and dangers that it can entail. The movie is an eye-opener, bolstered by the work of a stellar cast.

The plot follows Fern (Frances McDormand), a widow who loses financial security after her husband dies and her home town is essentially shut down. Living completely on her own and without a house, she makes the best of it by converting her van into a makeshift home complete with a bed, a hotplate for cooking, and other accoutrements. We watch Fern travel across the land, taking temporary employment at places like Amazon before moving on to the next stop.

Along the way, she interacts with nomadic communities.

Some of her new acquaintances become close friends, including Dave (David Strathairn), a man who offers to help her find a bit of work in South Dakota.

But of course, living in a beat-up vehicle is not without its own issues.

Although she has already won a pair of Oscars, star Frances McDormand is likely to receive another nomination for her work here. This is a role that the performer completely disappears into. Despite her hardships, the haggard and proud Fern wants no sympathy from others, choosing to move forward and continue living life on her own terms. And the various people she encounters all have their own fascinating tales, too.

Some are tired of spending their lives in servitude of the almighty dollar, others have psychological conditions that make them require solitude in the wild, while others have undergone unexpected difficulties that have left them in dire straits. The entire cast of performers is excellent as we see them going about their daily routines. In fact, their onscreen work is so naturalistic that it at times feels as if one is watching a documentary (apparently, a few of the supporting actors in the film are real nomads).

Obviously, the lifestyle displayed is a difficult one. Something as simple as using the restroom provides challenges, as do the difficulties encountered by a flat tire, something the character encounters in a move to a much harsher climate during the winter. One can almost feel the dropping temperatures along with the lead and fear for what might happen to Fern should the engine or body of her small mobile home encounter trouble.

Another interesting aside that leads to some existential conflict is the way those outside Fern’s nomadic circle treat her. They’re often confused by her behavior and her unwillingness to accept their help. Yet one quickly gets a sense of the character and the performer does a good job helping viewers relate. It’s never explicitly stated and may even be a subconscious response to the situation, but Fern’s sternness and actions may in part come from feelings of being wronged to some degree by her husband’s employers.

The film is starkly and simply shot (again, almost like a documentary). It’s not the prettiest movie in the world, but the images work in order to show the harshness of the surrounding environment. And thankfully, there are several scenic shots of areas like the Badlands and other desert regions in the Southwest. These pictures all provide a bit of relief to the story’s darker and more severe elements.

This isn’t an upbeat movie and the narrative doesn’t offer solutions, but it does feel realistic in its desire to show the lives of nomadic people in the U.S. For those who haven’t considered the difficulties these people face daily, it’s quite enlightening. It may also cause one to consider the current state of the country and how much of its workforce is underpaid, underappreciated and living from paycheck to paycheck. While some of the characters have made a personal choice to adopt such a lifestyle, there are many who aren’t that far off from a similar situation and would prefer a roof over their heads.

In the end, *Nomadland* marks an exceptional, compassionate and timely drama that is anchored by a wonderful lead performance and convincing supporting performances. Anyone in the mood for a serious awards contender is advised to check it out.

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By Glenn Kay
For the Sun