

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (dir. Marielle Heller, 2019)

Cast

Lloyd (journalist): Matthew Rhys: Welsh-born, Emmy-winning star of *The Americans* (13-18)
Andrea (his wife): Susan Kelechi Watson: *This Is Us* (16-20); only her fourth part in a movie
Fred Rogers: Tom Hanks: Middle-aged rookie plucked from obscurity to assay this role
Joanne (his wife): Maryann Plunkett: Small parts in *Blue Valentine* (10), *Little Women* (19)
Jerry (Lloyd's dad): Chris Cooper: *American Beauty* (99); *Adaptation* (02); *I love Lone Star* (96)
Dorothy (his wife): Wendy Makkena: Stalwart in film, TV, and theater; shy nun in *Sister Act* (92)
Lorraine (sister): Tammy Blanchard: The young Judy Garland in *Me and My Shadows* (01)
Todd (her husband): Noah Harpster: Sometime character actor, and the co-writer of this script

Off Camera

Director: Marielle Heller: Her third movie as director; she has also acted and done TV
Writers: Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster: Episodes of *Transparent* (14-17)
Cinematography: Jody Lee Lipes: Lots of TV work; last movie was *Manchester by the Sea* (16)
Film Editing: Anne McCabe: Excels in character studies, like *You Can Count on Me* (00)
Production Design: Jade Healy: Big year for her, since she also designed *Marriage Story* (19)
Costume Design: Arjun Bhasin: *Monsoon Wedding* (01); our first movie, *Love Is Strange* (14)
Original Score: Nate Heller: The director's younger brother, who has scored all of her films

Also directed by Marielle Heller...

The Diary of a Teenage Girl (2015) – Winner of Best First Feature at the Independent Spirit Awards, this adaptation of Phoebe Gloeckner's mixed-media quasi-memoir is about Minnie, a girl in early-70s San Francisco who has an affair with the 30-year-old boyfriend (Alexander Skarsgård of *Big Little Lies*) of her single mother (Kristen Wiig). Heller, who had first adapted this story as a play in which she starred, interjects quite a few animated scenes and details into the conventionally-filmed scenes, to represent the budding comic artist Minnie is becoming.

Can You Ever Forgive Me? (2018) – Many of you saw this wry but painful comedy-drama when it earned Oscar nominations for its stars, Melissa McCarthy and Richard E. Grant, and for the screenplay by Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty. Holofcener had always intended to direct the film herself and was well into pre-production before a creative falling out with star Julianne Moore ground it to a halt. Heller earned acclaim not just for rescuing a film that had become such a sorrow for everyone but for evoking 1980s New York City with such specific tones and textures, while keeping viewers sympathetic to an irascible and indeed felonious protagonist.

Tidbits gleaned from *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018):

If you haven't seen Morgan Neville's generous, informative documentary, some details about Fred Rogers that *A Beautiful Day* omits but may be interesting to consider are: 1) that he was an ordained minister who had planned to go to seminary, before deciding he could make a bigger difference on TV; 2) that a series of childhood diseases often left him bedridden, so inventing voices and characters for various puppets and stuffed animals was a way to combat his fear and isolation; 3) that in the very first episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, in 1968, "King Friday the 13th" issues a new law closing his nation's borders, scaring all the animals with the barbed-wire walls he insists on constructing; 4) that Fred Rogers was a lifelong registered Republican; and 5) that his daily routine of swimming and other exercise was in part a tactic to keep his body weight precisely at 143 lbs. for at least three decades! This last detail, which he shared with *many* people he worked with, seemed to appeal to his sense of what an iron will makes possible; he also liked that the phrase "I love you" has three words of 1, 4, and 3 letters.

Other films you might rent if you enjoyed *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*...

Beginners (2010) – A delicious, wise, romantic, sad, and funny comedy-drama about a lonesome cartoonist (Ewan McGregor), still grieving the loss of his mother, who is both moved and bewildered by the coming-out of his aged father (Christopher Plummer, who won an Oscar), who is intent on spending his later years living out his real identity and embracing happiness.

Synecdoche, New York (2008) – An acquired taste, but a great favorite for those of us who love it. The story is about a playwright (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who keeps adding and adding and adding to his latest work until his entire world is a stage set within a stage set within a stage set, and nobody can tell a difference anymore between real people and the actors playing them.

Wonderstruck (2017) – Free to rent on Amazon Prime, this was a distinctive and unusual child-centered drama clearly aimed at adults, telling two stories in period-specific styles about two deaf children visiting New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in different decades. The 1920s story is filmed as an old silent movie. The 1970s half is inspired by street photography of that era. The tales eventually come together in a semi-magical way that involves a massive miniature model of New York City that Mr. Rogers *and* Marielle Heller would probably love.

Dottie Gets Spanked (1993) – Yep, the title sounds crazy. This half-hour short film, made for PBS, is about a small, introverted boy in the 1950s who wins a national magazine contest to visit the set of a TV show clearly inspired by *I Love Lucy*. He is surprised by what he finds there, just as he is confused by snippets he overhears about the lives of other kids in his class. Meanwhile, his father is worried about his young son's fascination with women and fashion. The look and tone of this movie have a surprising amount in common with *A Beautiful Day*. ([YouTube link](#))

The *Toy Story* Films (1995, 1999, 2010, 2019) – Like *Mister Rogers's Neighborhood*, this Pixar series resonates at least as much for adults as for the kids who gobble the films. They confront mature ideas about acclimating to change, accepting difference, performing self-critiques, overcoming abandonment... I could go on. I'm sure you've seen them, but watch them again!

Inside Out (2015) – Another example of Pixar picking up the mantle of Fred Rogers, and telling a story about the volatility but also the legitimacy and seriousness of children's emotions. The tale culminates with the very Mister Rogers-style insight that it's okay to feel joy *and* sadness.

Facts about *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* you may appreciate...

The project launched almost a decade ago, remaining at the stage of script revision for quite a long time. Joanne Rogers and the family estate were very supportive of the idea but also very intent on its factual and spiritual accuracy to Fred Rogers's life and work. For some of this period, the planned directors were *Little Miss Sunshine*'s Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Marielle Heller's involvement both coincided with the long-awaited moment of the script's readiness and seemed in its own way to energize the project, given people's respect for her prior work.

Heller had committed to the movie before the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* opened last year and before its reception proved to everyone what a fund of affection for Fred Rogers still exists around the world. Rather than feeling pre-empted by a similar project, Heller only felt excitement about having a ready audience, and further freed *not* to duplicate the life story.

Marielle Heller met Tom Hanks at a party at his son Colin's house. Their discussion—and, in particular, her determination not to make a “biopic” but a character drama about an *encounter* with Rogers—so excited Hanks that he signed on gladly...having previously passed on this project three different times! Lucky, too, since after *Captain Phillips* (2013), *Bridge of Spies* (2015), *Sully* (2016), *The Post* (2017), and other recent projects, Hanks had reportedly asked his agents not to send him more scripts that would obligate him to impersonate a real figure.

Joanne Rogers was elated about Hanks playing her late husband, giving him several of Fred's old ties. Hanks credits her with working generously to help fine-tune and humanize his take on Rogers, well past the point of a superficial imitation. The project was also informed, not just in its accuracy, by filming on the same WQED set in Pittsburgh where Rogers taped his shows.

Heller and her husband had their first child in late 2014. Lead actor Matthew Rhys and his partner Keri Russell had *their* first child in 2016, when Rhys was 41. (When Lloyd's father cracks that Lloyd seems a little old to be a first-time dad, it may have cut a little close to home! And yes, the real Junod was very close to that same age when he and his wife had their child.) Heller has certainly attested that parenting such a young son while working on this film was a huge influence. She even organized the shooting days on a 10-hour clock with no lunch hour but a firm stopping-point, so that everyone working on the project could go home to their families. And at the top of each day's “call sheet”—the schedule listing what scenes will be filmed during a given day, in what sequence—she always included an inspirational quote from Fred.

Part of why so many scenes play out in such long takes, without necessarily flaunting their lack of edits, was to approximate the grammar of Fred Rogers's show, which deliberately refused the steadily accelerating pace and chaotic editing of children's programs, insisting instead on calm, slowness, and even silence. Heller has also admitted that shooting long takes was a way of acclimating actors to that pace, building long pauses and silences (restful or awkward) into their exchanges in ways that would honor the show but also Rogers's personal temperament and style. Hanks, talking as slow as possible, could not believe he needed to go even slower!

Among many interviews I read with Marielle Heller to make this sheet, [this one](#) for *Slant* covered the most ground and included the richest answers, on everything from filming that minute of silence in the restaurant to working in Pittsburgh just after the 2018 synagogue shooting.

Broad conversation topics about *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*...

Style: I *loved* realizing in the movie's opening moments that Heller and her collaborators were going to film some of the fictional scenes about Lloyd in the style of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. To me, this wasn't just a cute conceit but an inspired orientation into the very particular emotional world of slowness, candor, and tenderness that Fred Rogers was all about, but which Lloyd has trouble entering. I wonder how you reacted to this stylistic choice in the film. Did you feel like it distanced you more from the material or pulled you in closer?

Imitation...: Basically every actor who plays a real-life character states as their cardinal rule that they didn't "just want to do an imitation." In this case, not unlike what Renée Zellweger achieves in *Judy*, I see Hanks being meticulous about some of Fred Rogers's most specific mannerisms (like the punctilious way he pronounces hard *t*'s and *d*'s at the ends of his words, and allows himself long pauses between movements or sentences) without effacing his own presence as a star we know. As a result, he allows us to link the associations we already have with Hanks to what we already feel about Rogers, while still creating a specific individual onscreen. I am curious how you felt about Hanks's casting and about his performance.

...and Evasion: I'm particularly intrigued by how Hanks negotiated the challenge of playing someone who preached the value of emotional openness but obviously deflected a huge number of personal questions and guarded his own core of privacy. I think we see this especially in the second interview Lloyd attempts, this time in New York City, where Fred has a hard time putting aside his puppets and keeps answering questions with questions. The long, tense stare after Lloyd lobs a tough query about how Fred's sons felt about having "Mr. Rogers" as their dad is one of my favorite moments in the performance, because Hanks allows Fred to look so wary and provoked, but refuses at first to say anything. What were your thoughts about the way Mr. Rogers kept aloof in so many ways? Have you seen that in other Hanks roles? How did you read that lonely, piano-playing finale in the dark TV set?

Masculinity: Tom Junod, the journalist who inspired Lloyd, says in the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* that watching and interacting with Mr. Rogers, he "definitely saw another way of being a man." Heller, whose other films have been centered on female characters, gave this lovely quote to [IndieWire](#) vis-à-vis Lloyd, not Fred, being the main character: "I think there's something really beautiful about a male protagonist [whose] goal at the end of the movie is not to be some big hero who saves the day, but ... to be a more emotionally evolved person and a better father and husband.... We don't really have movies often where that's the end goal for a male protagonist." To what extent did you understand Lloyd's conflicts in the movie (with his father, with his own new role as a dad, with Mr. Rogers as a highly guarded interview subject) as specifically gendered? Or did they feel more universal?

Real-World Difficulty: One thing people often celebrate about *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and often observe as missing in popular memories of him and his show, is the willingness to confront such tough topics as war, assassination, divorce, and fears of death. *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* honors that legacy by making allusions to tough problems across our culture, like the way Lloyd's African American wife can't get a cab to take her home late at night. What other moments indicate the movie's refusal to be only sunshine and rainbows?