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Movie review: 'Coming Through the Rye' satisfies with wit, respect, and optimism

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Coming Through the Rye

Rating: ★★★★★

With full disclosure, this very writer is an absolute sucker for a satisfying "coming-of-age" film. Their youthful themes keep us young and sway our sensibilities to reflect on our own lives, no matter our age. Admirable coming-of-age films are always welcome, but the exceptional ones deserve to get shouted from the mountaintops. James Sadwith's "Coming Through the Rye" recently won Best Film and Best Screenplay honors at the 2016 Phoenix Film Festival. This infatuating dramedy earns that special distinction of exceptionality and warrants all of the volume one can muster.

In 1969, at the preppy Crampton boarding school for boys in Pennsylvania, Jamie Schwartz ([Alex Wolff](#)) is a downtrodden theater nerd suppressed and marginalized by the cliques of athletes and popular kids. Awkward around girls and too smart for the room, he has lost more friendships than he has kept and tends to fly on his own self-aware path. He breaks the fourth wall to introduce us to his plight-filled existence and how he got to this point.

www.comingthroughtheryemovie.com

Jamie has long been completely inspired by and obsessed with the Holden Caulfield character from J.D. Salinger's seminal 1951 classic "The Catcher in the Rye." He sees himself living the same tortured and troubled existence, so much so that he has adapted Salinger's novel into a stage screenplay for his senior project. To properly pitch the idea to his professors, Jamie seeks to acquire adaptation permission from Jerome David Salinger himself (Academy Award

winner Chris Cooper), something the reclusive author never granted, not even for millions from Hollywood types like Elia Kazan.

After dead-ends with Salinger's publisher and agent, Jamie drafts an impassioned letter that is stolen and embarrassingly exposed by his classmates. Humiliated enough to leave school, Jamie decides to follow a tip on Salinger's possible New Hampshire address and runs away, convinced he can pitch the author best in person. Talked out of hitchhiking, he gains a doting driver and kindred spirit in the form of DeeDee (Stefania Owens). Their road trip of shared bonding and followed breadcrumbs becomes the film's ambitious mission.

"Coming Through the Rye" exudes a polish and a vibe that defines the film's wit and tone. Cinematographer Eric Hurt moves his camera with both intimacy and distance to suit any scene. Encapsulating an outward voice all its own, the film boats a dynamite soundtrack of original songs from composer Heath MacNease and songwriter Jay Nash. Through every decision and creative step, the film speaks volumes and rises above the overplayed tropes that keep most coming-of-age-films from being exceptional.

We all know the real beauty is in the journey, not in the objective. "Coming Through the Rye" epitomizes that expression and offers a noteworthy pair to share the passenger seats of a Rambler compact through the fall colors of New England. Alex Wolff and Stefania Owens completely capture your hearts with such charm. Both are two legitimate teen performers, not twenty-something trying to play younger. For lack of a better term, they completely feel, well, "real" in that regard. Their chemistry is sweetly disarming through Jamie's highs and lows.

Be prepared to bow at the genius of Alex Wolff. His layered advancement as Jamie is what earns this film a large part of its deserved respect. Wolff shows immense talent greater than the mere glimpses seem in his supporting commercial roles, like his high school boyfriend bit part in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding 2." Alex wholly succeeds presenting the character shadings to carry the Holden Caulfield likenesses within Jamie, be it handling bullying, questions of sexuality, jealousy, emotional distress, frustration, anger, love and loss. Pay attention to that young man.

The matching substantial effort to the success of "Coming Through the Rye" is the grounded filmmaking of James Sadwith, in his feature screenwriting and directing debut. He deftly merges the sensible and the sensitive with challenging reality when it comes to the film's range of emotions. He calibrates an honesty to support the whimsical humor and tone. He chooses the right moments to push and the right moments to celebrate, using layers of beautiful simplicity and nuance from his performers. One might think a film like this is riding the coattails of Salinger. On the contrary, "Coming Through the Rye" is a satisfying and inspirational experience in its own right.

Lesson #1: When you find a story that inspires or parallels your life-- Through Holden Caulfield, Jamie finds a corollary to dealing with his own similar troubles. Finding a comparable example of overcoming a particular challenge can be a helpful and inspiring study. The only trapping is that hero worship has its own limits and flaws.

Lesson #2: An original creator protecting their work-- Take the notion of hero worship a step further. What would you say or do if you met your inspiration? What would they think of you and your emulation? That hero or creator might say that no one can "get" or be them, or their work, but them. They might say that stealing, borrowing, copying, or adapting, even in devout tribute, devalues the original and becomes a different artist's interpretation entirely.

Lesson #3: Finding the bravery to do something of your own-- Jamie feels that staging "The Catcher in the Rye" at school can validate his value and his coolness independent from the typical popularity. He feels that if others can see him play Holden that they will understand him better through the play's performance and artistic expression that relates to him. The real truth is the courage to represent yourself, blaze your own trail, and create your own masterpiece with your own life, without standing on the shoulders of others.

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