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'Florida' explores life in shadow of Disney

The 6-year-old central character of "The Florida Project," Moonee (Brooklynn Prince), is a modern-day Huck Finn. Left mostly to her own devices, she roams a colony of cheap motels, filled with budget tourists, transients and near-homeless families, along Florida's Route 192 — the road to Disney's Magic Kingdom.

Full of cheek and mischief, the ebullient Moonee lives in the ironically, euphemistically and misleadingly named Magic Castle Motel. She shares a room in the lilac- and orchid-hued motor lodge with her mother, Halley (Bria Vinaite) and spends her days exploring, vandalizing and competing with her friends in challenges such as a spitting contest to hit the windshield of a car below from a second-floor railing.

Moonee leads a posse of mop-pets, integrating new members with ease and accepting, as if they were never there, the absence of those who must abruptly move on.

The fluid populace of the motel strip constantly groups

and regroupes to form makeshift families of choice, families of necessity and families in need.

Dustups inevitably occur, then the motel folds back into its constant rhythm, an inviolable cycle.

Inspired by "The Little Rascals," the Depression Era comic shorts that feature adventurous children who live in poverty, director Sean Baker (whose immediately previous film, "Tangerine," was shot entirely with an iPhone camera) has said he used the Rascals' style to make "The Florida Project."

"[T]hey focused on the joy and heart and humor of being a child, and we wanted to do the same thing," Baker told The Hollywood Reporter.

Bobby (Willem Dafoe), the motel's manager, is patient and paternal, but also sad and inescapably tethered to the strip. Dafoe's quiet performance would be the highlight of the film if Prince were not such a sunny breakout surprise as the precocious but not precious Moonee.

Newcomer Vinaite, ideally cast as Halley, is beautiful in a tattooed, tough-chick kind of way.



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She puts one in the mind of Courtney Love, or even Kellyanne Conway. Baker says he wanted Halley and Moonee to resonate almost as siblings. That chemistry clearly exists between them. The two have an enviable and loving relationship.

Halley has to resort to various hustles to pay the rent, even at \$38 per night, and these acts of survival threaten to separate

mother and daughter. The child welfare agency is the menace that haunts the movie.

We look at the two and wonder how the fearless and adventurous Moonee can avoid becoming another Halley.

Central Florida's kitschy Crayola-colored urban landscape is an uncredited character in the movie. Its deliberately cartoonish architecture — the restaurant shaped like half an orange turned upside-down, the gift shop adorned with a giant wizard's head and the ice cream kiosk shaped like a soft-serve spiral — enhances the leitmotif of Moonee's experience of her small world as one big amusement park.

There is a scene in which Moonee and her friend Jancey (Valeria Cotto) are sitting astride the trunk of a fallen tree, blissfully enjoying a feast of jam slathered on bread.

"Do you know why this is my favorite tree?" Moonee asks, and then answers her own question. "Cause it's tipped over and it's still growing."

Just like Moonee.