

The failure of David O. Russell's *Joy*, or, what any “sensible” person should know about modern society

By David Walsh
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Directed by David O. Russell; written by Russell and Annie Mumolo

David O. Russell's *Joy* is not an interesting or inspiring film to write about, despite a number of charming features and performances. In the end, more than anything else, it speaks dispiritingly to the distance between the group of filmmakers presently active, including its “independent” wing, and harsh economic and social realities. The blatant untruth of *Joy* as a generalized—and broadly applicable—picture of American life distorts and weakens it beyond repair.

Russell's new film is loosely inspired by the life story of multimillionaire inventor and entrepreneur Joy Mangano, born in Brooklyn in 1956, who dreamed up the self-wringing Miracle Mop, Huggable Hangers, Performance Platforms, Forever Fragrant and other products. Mangano is associated in particular with the phenomenon of televised home shopping. She first began selling her mops on the QVC cable network in 1992.

No fool, Russell, the director of *Flirting with Disaster*, *Three Kings*, *I Heart Huckabees*, *The Fighter*, *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle*, has not made a crude or dutifully accurate “biopic,” but, as he puts it, a “cinematic fable.”

And a fable it is. We see Joy (no last name is used, increasing the distance between the character and the real-life Mangano) as a child, creatively cutting up paper to make objects and buildings. Her grandmother, Mimi (Diane Ladd), attempts to instill confidence in Joy, while her mother, Terry (Virginia Madsen), and father, Rudy (Robert De Niro), who runs an auto repair shop, are too self-involved and angry at one another to make such an effort.

Joy, you see, has “dreams.” She develops the idea for a self-releasing dog collar, only to see a large corporation come out with it soon after. She pledges to herself not to miss the next opportunity.

In the 1980s, Joy marries Tony (Édgar Ramírez), a would-be singer (“the next Tom Jones”) who never manages to make a living and help support the couple and their two children. Joy, now living on Long Island, works hard as a ticket agent for Eastern Airlines. She and Tony eventually divorce. They get along far better no longer married.

Unappreciated in Cinderella-like style, Joy takes care of her dysfunctional, somewhat damaged family. At the time the story gets going, Joy lives in the same house with her mother (who

hides in her room and watches soap operas), her father and her ex-husband (who live together in mutual dislike and torment in the basement), her children and her grandmother.

Some of the scenes of family chaos and Joy's increasing emotional and financial pressure are very well done. Russell has unquestionably developed in certain ways as a filmmaker since *Flirting with Disaster* (1996). One of the loveliest sequences involves Terry, a virtual recluse, desperately falling for a soft-spoken, handsome Haitian plumber, Toussaint (Jimmy Jean-Louis), called in to fix a pipe. Madsen is excellent.

After two failed marriages, Joy's father meets Trudy (Isabella Rossellini), the well-meaning but self-centered widow of a man rich enough to own a 55-foot sailboat. When the family goes for a sail and a glass breaks on deck, Joy mops it up and cuts her hand. She has an idea. ...

Much of the rest of the film is a tribute to Joy's unshakable determination to design and sell her miracle mop, in the face of her family's lack of support (or actual sabotage in the case of her stepsister), the vagaries of the marketplace and the crookedness of various business associates. Or as one commentator puts it, “From here, Joy (and *Joy*) takes off, hurdling toward success and innovation.”

In its concluding quarter-hour or so, *Joy* enters the realm of self-conscious mythologizing. Without giving too much away, the denouement of the film, complete with Joy's meaningful sunglasses and equally meaningful snowflakes, is unconvincing and contrived, almost absurd; it contradicts what is best in the rest of the work.

Unfortunately, everything ends well for Joy. One retains hope, until perhaps those same 15 minutes from the end, that things will turn out disastrously in Russell's version of events for our aspiring businesswoman. Various sources will tell you that the real Mangano has a net worth today of \$50 million. So this is a “success story,” unless you are one of those who doubt that piling up a great deal of money has anything to do with success, who believes that, on the contrary, such a pursuit is generally both empty and debilitating.

In any event, the release of *Joy* has generated a flood of nonsense. “Women in the World,” a media organization headed by the infamous Tina Brown (British-born former editor of *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker* and other publications) and now associated

with the *New York Times*, staged a press event in mid-December, at which Mangano, Russell and Lawrence were guests.

The breathless account by “Women in the World” provides some flavor of the event, held before “an audience of business executives, entrepreneurs, and media personalities of the likes of Gayle King [“best friends with Oprah Winfrey”], Joanna Coles [editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan*], Paula Zahn [former news anchor at ABC, CBS, Fox and CNN] and Sheryl WuDunn [currently senior managing director at Mid-Market Securities, a boutique investment banking firm in New York].”

We are informed that “the woman who stole the show was the real Joy—Joy Mangano—whose introduction by Brown resulted in an excited eruption of applause.” The moneyed applauding—from awe, envy or a combination of the two—the even more moneyed. Mangano later told the well-heeled crowd, “There comes a point where we have to say who am I? Where is that courage going to come from? Once you find that space within yourself, well then, you really can attack anything, I think, and achieve anything.”

The article itself observes, “And that’s the overarching message of *Joy*. As the debate over whether women can have it all rages on, here is the hero that we need: an ordinary woman who had a vision and a dream for her life, and refused to let anything or anybody—even her family—stand in her way.” Mangano claimed at the media event that the film would have an impact on “millions of women, people young and old.”

How so? Will it have a positive impact on those millions of women who currently rise at 5 or 6 a.m., travel long distances by car, bus or train, toil 8 or 10 hours or more, travel home, make dinner and deal with their families as best they can, grab a few hours of sleep and begin the daily grind again the next morning, for \$9 or \$10, or \$12 a hour, slaving away year after year? The suggestion is deeply insulting and false.

One wants to ask Russell, who is not a stupid individual—these other millions, who have not prospered, is it that they are not suitably determined, are they too lazy, too quarrelsome, insufficiently focused? He would likely answer, “No, that is not what I think.” Then why, one would like to say, did you make a shallow film that lends itself to such an interpretation?

Various reviewers have been quick to pick up on *Joy*’s themes: “*Joy* is Russell’s most optimistic film, including *The Fighter* director’s usual fondness for humanity, yet this time restoring belief in traditional American ethics and ideals. ... Russell’s new film reminds us, without coming off too on-the-nose or idealistic: with hard work, smarts, and self-sufficiency, it is still possible to love your family *and* build a successful business empire on your own.”

Another commentator calls it an “uplifting capitalism tale,” a third notes, “Rarely has capitalism looked so colourful,” and a fourth terms *Joy* “A sunny ode to capitalism.” Inevitably too, the film is a “female empowerment drama.”

All of this flies in the face of economic and social reality, as Russell ought to know perfectly well.

One of his characters (played by Bradley Cooper), an executive at QVC, the home shopping channel, tells Joy that in America “the ordinary meets the extraordinary.” At the “Women in the World”

event, Russell echoed this, observing, “What is sublime and extraordinary comes out of what is ordinary and ugly, and that’s the mystery of life.”

In criticizing *Joy*, it is not a matter of sneering at the “ordinary” or at products that make life easier, but no one can seriously argue that such minor, labor-saving devices are what stands between tens of millions of households and decent living conditions and economic security.

Intriguing art does often emerge from the “ordinary,” but not from the self-deluded, ultimately selfish, petty bourgeois banalities that Russell lowers himself to peddle here. Joy “makes it,” but what about everybody else? To hell with them, apparently. A genuine tribute to the “ordinary” human being, whether Büchner’s *Woyzeck* or Chaplin’s “Tramp” character, inevitably has the character of a protest against existing conditions and an appeal for *solidarity* against those conditions. There is not an iota of that here, which speaks to some of the difficulties of our day.

It has been suggested that in portraying Joy’s difficulties Russell has in mind, by analogy, his own and the general struggle to make independent films and the need to proceed with utter ruthlessness, to the point of “killing” one’s enemies. Determination, perseverance, yes...but to what end? For illuminating and great purposes, not this small change.

When he was a Marxist, the German socialist Karl Kautsky remarked, “The possibility of the wage-earner becoming a capitalist is, in the ordinary run of events, out of the question. Sensible people do not consider the chance of winning a prize in a lottery or of falling heir to the wealth of some unknown relative when they deal with the condition of the working-class.” For the average worker, investing “his little savings in some small independent industry were for him to fall from the frying pan into the fire,” Kautsky went on.

Why is Russell perpetuating fantasies in *Joy* as harmful as those about winning the lottery or inheriting wealth from “some unknown relative”? It may be that in face of current widespread economic hardship and the absence of any sense of a political alternative emerging, the best the filmmaker thinks he can do is to perpetuate illusions and myths in the belief that the population needs *something* to keep it going. But it would be far better to tell the truth about the situation.

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