

RUNNING WITH SCISSORS

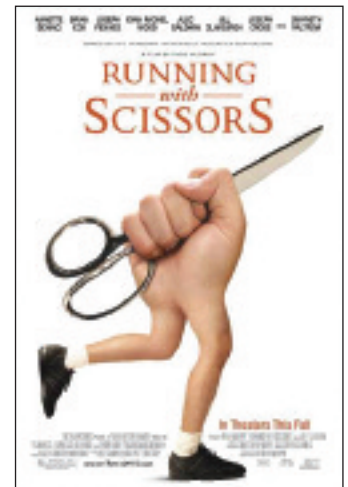
A Tri Star 2006 release

A Sony Pictures Production

Screenplay and Direction by Ryan Murphy

Based on the personal memoir of Augusten Burroughs

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser



Are you feeling constipated? Physically or emotionally perhaps? If so, this is a film just for you. Based on the personal memoirs of Augusten Burroughs the film explores his hardship and struggle in being caught up in a highly dysfunctional family where his father, Norman Burroughs (played by Alec Baldwin) is a rejecting, distant alcoholic and his mother, Deirdre Burroughs (played by Annette Bening) is an unstable, boundaryless dependant with mood and personality disturbances to match the best of them, not to mention that she is a rigid unsuccessful writer. Augusten (played by Joseph Cross) has to somehow grow up within an environment filled with conflict and uncertainty, with two people incapable of giving him much needed parental guidance, support, nurturance and security.

The story gets more complicated, and Augusten is challenged even more when, after his parents' divorce he is 'adopted' by his mother's 'prescription-happy and ethically challenged' therapist, Dr. Finch (played by Brian Cox) who only has two things on his mind – sex and money. Dr. Finch is also inclined to 'receive' messages in the form of his bowel movements and he stirs up the whole household into believing his 'visions'.

None of the Finch family members are 'normal' either. The family's eldest daughter Hope (played by Gwyneth Paltrow) is a hopeless, fatalistic depressive who plans her future by choosing random words and passages from the Bible. Hope has a very clear alliance with her father, and one immediately realises that here is a very complex and enmeshed relationship that makes you wonder as to the true history between father and daughter.

Compared to her, the Finch's youngest daughter Natalie (played by Rachel Evan Wood) is the total opposite of Hope, living a temptress image that acts on a whim without any impulse control. She unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Augusten into a hilarious ECT experience with her at the controls of the very outdated machine.

An added addition to the Finch household is another 'adopted' son, Neil Bookman (played by Joseph Fiennes), a 35-

year old unstable schizophrenic with some artistic tendencies. Augusten is soon drawn into an intimate relationship with Neil and one sees that in all the chaos and truly fragmented milieu of the story Augusten finds a degree of love, acceptance and support. Dr. Finch's wife Agnes (played by Jill Clayburgh), although detached, neglected and emotionally blunted individual, proves to be the most stable, empathic and insightful person in the end. She acts as a sort of much-needed substitute mother figure to Augusten.

Throughout Augusten's stay with the Finches he witnesses his mother's rapid deterioration to the point of a total psychotic breakdown – thanks in part to Dr. Finch's treatment methods. Deirdre Burroughs dabbles in all sorts of experiences, ranging from lesbian experiences to a very unsuccessful and highly charged poetry reading group that she 'facilitates'. Augusten's father is totally absent throughout his mother's deterioration, and breakdown, which leaves a significant scar on the young and impressionable Augusten.

What makes this film exceptional and worth the time to watch is the fact that seemingly never before has any film portrayed so many ethical dilemmas, emotional struggles and at times downright bizarreness in one sitting. Set in the 70's the film makes exceptional use of music, literature and colour to support the various events and behaviours of the characters. In addition, the use of humour, albeit more black humour at times makes the film's overwhelming content and processes bearable.

Throughout all the bizarreness one easily forgets that this is a person's real story although it should be kept in mind that the film version of Augusten Burroughs' book is an interpretation of his heartbreaking story and journey through adolescence. The film is a truly overwhelming experience, but worth every minute of it. Her acting shows Bening's brilliance as an actress in this highly demanding role yet again. One is left with a great sense of gratitude and admiration for Augusten, and one is amazed that any person can 'survive' such experiences without showing significant damage.