

Sherrybaby

USA 2006

95 mins

Crew and Cast

Director	Laurie Collyer
Screenplay	Laurie Collyer
Cinematography	Russell Lee Fine
Sherry Swanson	Maggie Gyllenhaal
Bobby Swanson	Brad William Henke
P.O. Hernandez	Giancarlo Exposito
Bob Swanson Snr	Sam Bottoms
Lynette Swanson	Bridget Barkan
Alexis Parks	Ryan Simpkins
Marcia Swanson	Kate Burton
Dean Walker	Danny Trejo

Synopsis

Sherry Swanson, a 23-year-old former heroin addict, is released after three years in prison for robbery. During her time inside, her brother Bobby and his wife Lynette have been looking after her daughter Alexis. Sherry settles into a halfway house. Parole officer Hernandez is initially reluctant to give her a pass to stay in New Jersey with Bobby for a night, but eventually relents. Sherry meets Andy, who runs the halfway house, and they have sex in the basement. Bobby picks up Sherry and takes her to his house, where she's reunited with Alexis.

Sherry meets her job counsellor and gives him a blowjob so that he will put her forward for a position working with children. Finding it hard to stay clean, she attends a meeting. An ex-addict, Dean, gives her a lift home; he remembers her from when she stripped in a club as a 16-year-old. Unable to speak to Alexis, Sherry hitchhikes to Bobby's overnight. She tells him she doesn't want to go back to the halfway house. During a family meal, at which her father is also present, she becomes emotional. Bobby checks her into a motel. Sherry calls Dean, who comes over, and they have sex....

abridged from Sight & Sound Aug '07

Laurie Collyer made her debut at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival with the acclaimed documentary *Nuyorican Dream*, which followed an impoverished Puerto Rican family in New York over the course of three years. While waiting for financing for her original screenplay *Sherrybaby*, Collyer wrote two more scripts - *Scheiss Ami* and *I am in Training. Don't Kiss Me*. She also developed a one-hour TV documentary entitled *Ex CIS: When They Get Out*.



Review

Sherry Swanson wants to be taken seriously. She wants to rebuild her life. Released from prison after a three-year stretch, she's only too aware that this could constitute a new start, a chance to put her various demons behind her. She has been, at various points in her life, a stripper, an alcoholic, a junkie, and a neglectful mother - and this list, you sense, is by no means definitive. But she is not, emphatically not, a bad person; her will to change alone should attest to that. She is sober, now. She even carries a Bible, modern-day America's most potent sign of transformation. Yet our first glimpse of Sherry finds her walking along a city street, bra-less in a low-cut halter top, pausing to shout abuse at a fellow pedestrian who happened to bump her as he went by. She's all raw nerves and prickly, defensive pride, and you sense at once that her path to respectability will be a difficult one.

Laurie Collyer's debut feature -which recently won the Best Film Award at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival -is a tough and compelling example of American Dirty Realism, its characters inhabiting the same blue-collar subculture that fiction writers like Richard Ford and Denis Johnson have made their own. Based in Brooklyn, her own background is in non-fiction filmmaking -she made, among others, the superb *Nuyorican Dream* (1999), one of the finest American documentaries of the past decade - and that attentive eye, that patient sense of screen time, is evident in every frame here. As in her previous film, she has a keen awareness of how social groups work: the network of conflicting agendas and desires that constitute a family; and the scenes of Sherry playing with her estranged daughter, while clearly improvised, have a truthful, naturalistic quality that's little short of astounding.

Sherry knows she's attractive - it's all she's got, her only bargaining chip -and so has no qualms about using her body to get what she needs: in one scene, she blows an elderly employment officer just to land a job working with children. At other times, this sexuality seems easy and unforced (witness the carnal delight of her rendezvous with Andy) -but this, too, might be the legacy of a damaged past, as a queasily over-intimate moment with her father implies. However, it's a measure of the sureness of Collyer's instincts that she never overplays her hand: this back-story, with its potential for cliché, remains unexplored, latent. In this respect, she's aided by the performance of Maggie Gyllenhaal- who, along with Naomi Watts, is probably the most consistently interesting actress on the American screen right now. Gyllenhaal is not only versatile, capable of shifting from the perversity of *Secretary* to the winsome charm of *Mona Lisa Smile*, she's also fearless - perhaps the most important quality for any great performer. Willing to bare herself, psychologically as well as physically, for the camera, she imbues this drama with dignity, as well as the aching, desperate sadness it requires.

Edinburgh International Film Festival Programme 2006