

Miss Firecracker ★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

Miss Firecracker is a dramatic comedy in which the comedy works like a charm but the drama fizzles and never catches fire; in short, *Miss Firecracker* is a dramatic dud. The movie represents Beth Henley's adaptation of her 1984 off-Broadway play "The Miss Firecracker Contest." Henley won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for "Crimes of the Heart," which she also adapted for the big screen (her screenplay earned her an Oscar nomination in 1986).

The film is set (and was filmed on location) in Yazoo City, Mississippi, a small town which celebrates the Fourth of the July each year with its annual "Miss Firecracker" beauty pageant. Holly Hunter stars as Carnelle, one of the five finalists in the contest. Carnelle is a flaky, hyperactive, and punky young woman who is desperately in need of self-validation and social acceptance. Carnelle's fragile self-esteem is riding on the "Miss Firecracker" contest; she thinks winning it would not only lift her reputation as "Miss Hot Tamale," the town trollop, but also make her a respectable person. And who knows? Maybe it would even be her ticket out of town. Hunter gives a heartfelt and outrageously manic performance as Carnelle, showing once again her ability to completely sink into a character.

Miss Firecracker is full of strange and eccentric small town characters, not the least of whom is Carnelle herself. Carnelle's role model is her prim, proper, and unbearably ostentatious cousin Elain, played by Mary Steenburgen. Elain won the Miss Firecracker Contest in 1972, and life has been anticlimactic for her ever since. She has returned to Yazoo City for the 1988 pageant in order to deliver the keynote speech, "My Life as a Beauty." Steenburgen's performance as Elain is adequate, but her character is so nauseating that you don't feel the least bit of sympathy for her.

In contrast, Tim Robbins' character is far more endearing. He gives a strong comic performance

as Delmount, Elain's tormented and short-tempered younger brother, who recently has been released from an insane asylum. He has returned home to Yazoo City to sell the old and decrepit family homestead. The most original character in *Miss Firecracker* is Popeye Jackson, Delmount's romantic interest and Carnelle's seamstress. Popeye is an amateur dressmaker who sews clothing for bullfrogs and who claims to hear voices through her eyeballs. Alfre Woodard gives a whimsical, tour de force performance as the cheerful and sweetly naive seamstress.

The eccentric characters in *Miss Firecracker* are the prime reason the film works as a comedy; in every scene an off-beat character does or says something strange. *Miss Firecracker* revels in its weirdness, and as the movie progresses, the weirdness escalates until it finally reaches a peak during the beauty contest. In the talent portion of the pageant, for instance, a contestant with yellow teeth reenacts a scene from *Gone with the Wind*, and her atrocious acting evokes tears from the judges and onlookers.

Unfortunately, *Miss Firecracker* falls flat on its face during its attempts at drama. The movie takes itself much too seriously, and its credibility is sabotaged by Thomas Schlamme's heavy-handed direction, David Mansfield's overbearing score, and Beth Henley's corny dialogue. To make matters worse, you really don't care about the characters, despite the charming performances.

Miss Firecracker tries too hard and tries to do too much, and as a result it winds up doing too little. The film's moments of comic inspiration just aren't enough to compensate for the stale melodrama it inflicts on us. So unless you are a die-hard Hunter fan (like myself), you may be better off skipping *Miss Firecracker* altogether and getting your laughs from the real thing, the Miss America Beauty Pageant.