

## Running on Empty ★★ ★<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

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**Year of Release:** 1988

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** See It

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Imagine moving to a new town and assuming a new identity every year because you're on the run from the F.B.I. for a crime you didn't commit. Now imagine having these problems at 17, that difficult age of college applications, first love, and transition from adolescence to adulthood. In director Sidney Lumet's *Running on Empty*, River Phoenix finds himself in just this predicament.

His parents are Arthur and Annie Pope, left wing radicals who blew up a napalm factory in 1971 as part of the war protest; the explosion blinded and paralyzed a janitor who was not scheduled to be in the building at the time. To avoid imprisonment, the Popes went underground with their then two year old son and cut off all ties to family and friends. *Running on Empty* is set 15 years later; their son (Phoenix) is now a high school senior who has lived underground for as long as he can remember.

*Running on Empty* opens with the Pope family fleeing from their current home because the FBI is on the verge of discovering their whereabouts. The Popes assume new identities and move to a new town. As they settle in, Phoenix's character is the focal point of the story. The music teacher at the local high school takes interest in Phoenix's piano playing and encourages him to apply to Juilliard. In the mean time, Phoenix falls in love with, and bares his soul to, his teacher's daughter—a rebellious free spirit played by Martha Plimpton.

*Running on Empty* examines the conflict that arises when the time comes for the Pope family to move on once again. Phoenix does not want to

leave his family, but staying with them means separating from Plimpton and abandoning his plans to attend college and study music. On the other hand, if Phoenix does leave his family, he may never see them again. Phoenix's father, played by Judd Hirsch, opposes his college plans. Arthur Pope is a stubborn man deeply committed to his family, which he views as an inseparable unit; he cringes at the idea of it breaking apart. In contrast, Phoenix's mother, Annie, sees gross injustice in making Phoenix give up his future for the crime she and Arthur committed. One of the most underrated actresses in the business, Christine Lahti—who was last seen in the unjustly neglected *Housekeeping*—plays Annie Pope.

Lumet's portrayal of the Pope family packs a powerful emotional punch. In fact, I recommend bringing a large supply of Kleenex since *Running on Empty* is likely to bring you to tears several times. For example, the scene of Lahti visiting her father for the first time since going underground is excruciatingly painful to watch. Under Lumet's sensitive direction, Lahti, Hirsch, Plimpton, and the rest of the cast give first-rate performances, but *Running on Empty* really belongs to Phoenix. As the conflicted young pianist, Phoenix is riveting in an Oscar caliber performance. It's hard to believe that this is the same actor who just two years ago played one of the young boys in *Stand By Me*. With his performance in *Running on Empty*, Phoenix has successfully bridged the transition from child acting to adult roles. This heartbreaking drama is one of the year's best films.

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