



Ben Kingsley and Max Pomeranc star in 'Searching for Bobby Fischer' which opens August 11 at Loews 84th Street and other theaters.

Kerry Hayes

'Searching for Bobby Fischer'

If Rocky Played Chess

BY MARK HALL AMITIN

Film

Warning! For those who go in for films with split-second cuts, chases and

shootouts, this is not for you. This is a slow, thoughtful study of the inner-workings of a young prodigy's spirit and of his family's understanding of his rare gift. Josh Waitzkin (Max Pomeranc) is an absolutely normal seven-year-old except, as he and we discover simultaneously, he is a chess genius, "the next Bobby Fischer." The film, expertly directed and written by Steven Zaillian (based on the true story and book by Fred Waitzkin), is a series of portraits of the nuclear and professional family that surround Josh, intercut with stock documentary footage of the reclusive and eccentric real Bobby Fisher, upon whom Josh patterns himself. Zaillian, making his impressive directing debut, wrote the screenplays for "Awakenings" and the upcoming Spielberg epic "Schindler's List." He is superbly adept at the adaptation of non-fiction. His greatest strength is his ability to unveil the evolution of a character's thoughts and feelings. The camera is right in the face, up close, virtually boring into the eyes, seeking what's going on behind them. He is abetted by a uniformly stellar cast of actors from whom he has drawn in-depth performances, not least of which is given by young Pomeranc and his nemesis, Jonathan Poe (Michael Nirenberg), another young actor of conviction and depth.

Josh and his mother (Joan Allen) are strolling past that southwest corner of Washington Square Park where the myriad shady denizens of chess hang literally pawning off one another for pocket change in swift "blitz" games. In a matter of minutes, Josh observes and methodically understands the premise and execution of the game. He's taken with the rash and brazen Vinnie (Laurence Fishburne), who adds zest and bra-

vado as his earliest model, one of the street players who seems to live in the park. Later, in a revelation of Josh's true spirit, he says to his mom, "Maybe Vinnie could come stay here."

When Josh's father Fred (Joe Mantegna), a sportswriter, awakens to his son's special talent, he becomes obsessed with turning him into a pro. He finds a championship teacher, Bruce Pandolfini, played with riveting zenlike intensity by Oscar-winner Ben Kingsley ("Gandhi"). Pandolfini befriends Josh, teaches him to see the board as a blank, then to envision the moves five steps beyond, to be methodical and not reactive. As Josh accumulates trophies at tournament after tournament, his father becomes more devout. Josh has his own doubts but idolizes his father and fears disappointing him. At school his teacher (Laura Linney) finds Josh becoming antisocial but has little understanding of what she calls "the chess thing." At parents' night, Fred confronts the teacher and decides to enroll Josh at the upscale Dalton school, where they even have a chess class.

Meanwhile, Pandolfini tries to toughen the boy up and prepare him for defeat, reducing him to near tears. Josh's mother demands the teacher "get out of my house." Here we are faced with the crux of the story: the need of Josh, who is "just a boy," to have friends, go fishing, to have a real life, in conflict with the all-consuming, rigid regimen and ethos of chess. Josh throws a tournament — even though he is the top-ranked player — as a way of letting his dad know he's caving in. Dad responds, the pressure is eased and Josh rejoins the circuit and resumes his winning streak. The denouement is the big win when the two mentors, Vinnie and Pandolfini, show up in Chicago to cheer Josh on to victory over his arch rival, Poe. Three moves before checkmate, Josh, looking

ahead, sees his win, offers Poe a draw as a way of their both "sharing" the title. Does he take it? See the movie. A brief epilogue informs us that today Josh is both a champion and a normal teenager, and that (presumably taller) he now also plays basketball and that Fisher, having reappeared briefly to reclaim his championship title, remains obscure and inscrutable, if not insufferable. Pawn to King three. Your move. ♘

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