

## London Film Festival 2018: Beautiful Boy

This drama on drug-addiction has little new to say on the subject despite its great central performances

By [Emily Taylor](#), Muse Editor (2017/18)

Tuesday 6 November 2018



Image: Amazon Studios

**6/10**

**Director:** Felix Van Groeningen

**Starring:** Timothée Chalamet, Steve Carell, Amy Ryan

**Length:** 2hr

**Rating:** 15

As drugs are seemingly fuelling much of Hollywood it's not that surprising that they feature heavily in films. Though, more often than not, drug-taking isn't taken seriously but more as a plot contrivance. It's a set-up for a joke or a McGuffin that a crime-lord is hunting down or, in artsier pictures, they are used as some kind of symbolism for some dark and brooding main character. That's mostly because it's an incredibly difficult and complicated issue to deal with, and to deal with addiction it's difficult to avoid dealing with issues of mental health and class. Even more so done wrong it can have potentially dangerous effects.

However *Beautiful Boy* is unafraid to put its focus on addiction. It is based on the memoirs of father and son, David (Steve Carell) and Nic Sheff (Timothée Chalamet) about Nic's drug addiction and subsequent recovery and relapses over several years. If you read this synopsis and think you know what is going to

happen in the film then you're probably right. Whilst it treats its subject matter seriously and responsibly perhaps it veers on the side of too safe.

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Over a decade ago films such as *Trainspotting* and *Requiem for a Dream* explored the topic of drug addiction in a way that still feels relevant. They were dark and often harrowing in a way that *Beautiful Boy* wants to be but never pulls off, veering nearer to melodrama than social realism. The former films also attempted to try and explain the 'why' of addiction in such a way that some have (erroneously) accused them of glamourizing addiction; *Beautiful Boy* isn't doing that. For the most part, the audience see the narrative through David's, not Nic's, point of view. It attempts to portray the often difficult and hopeless journey to recovery, and how difficult it is to watch somebody self-destruct. But by not looking at Nic's reasoning behind his substance abuse the emotional impact of his story is lessened.

Recreational drug-taking is by absolutely no means a rare phenomenon, it's remarkably common and as a University student, I'm under no illusion that club nights are fuelled by alcohol alone. By not depicting the precise circumstances around Nic's addiction or his specific reasons it characterizes the fall after his initial experimentation with drugs as inevitable which simply isn't true. It's the level of nuance found in anti-drug advertisements not feature films. Though it occasionally touches on the underlying issue of mental illness it has nothing particularly meaningful nor new to offer on the issue, something I doubt would be true of the memoirs the film is based on. Drug addiction is an incredibly nuanced problem and nuance isn't a strong suit of this film. For example, the bafflingly odd music choice of *Fiddler on the Roof's* 'Sunrise Sunset', not as a song that a character is listening to but as part of the soundtrack. Lyrically it's too on the nose whilst at the same time incredibly jarring because, well, it's from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Random musical numbers aside there are parts of this film that are good. Most notably were the two central performances which are the core of the film and are keeping the film together. When the film works, which on many occasions it does, and it provokes an emotional response it's due to the performances. Steve Carell continues to impress in an understated yet believable performance. Though it's Timothée Chalamet who stands out the most, fully committing to an emotionally raw performance which in the hands of a lesser actor would have descended into melodrama. Also, Muara Tierney deserves a mention who plays Karen Barbour as David's girlfriend and Nic's step-mother, she gives a fantastically complex and nuanced performance in very limited screen time.

*Beautiful Boy* is not a bad film. It's perfectly competent throughout, unfortunately it amounts to less than the sum of its parts. In its best moments it's an emotionally-affecting and well-acted drama and at its worst, it's an anti-drug PSA. Most of the time though it's simply fine. As the maxim goes: I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed. *Trainspotting* was released 22 years ago and is still being discussed now. I don't think the same will be said of *Beautiful Boy*.



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