

Upward Mobility and Downright Lies

By Caryn James

You want to end up back in the projects? Keep dreaming dreams that'll never happen," warns the heroine's mother in "Maid in Manhattan," when it looks like her daughter the chambermaid has lost the rich, handsome politician she loves. Gee, thanks, Mom.

In this Cinderella tale, the wicked non-stepmother has offered what amounts to the anti-moral of the story. We know that Marisa the maid's dreams will come true because she is Jennifer Lopez, because the trajectory of the film is obvious from its first two minutes, and because in old-fashioned Hollywood movies like this, character always transcends class, and class itself is no more than a tiny speed bump that good-hearted people can hop over.

What's more surprising is that this backward notion of easy upward mobility - which defies recent socio-economic studies - is so tenacious that it exists even in a far smarter, better, more realistic film like "Real Women Have Curves," the story of Ana, a working-class Latina whose mother doesn't want her to go to college. Here characters are believably hemmed in by class: Ana's complicated, resentful mother worries that her daughter's education will tear the family apart; her father is a gardener who has put aside just a little money; her sister is the struggling owner of a small shop that sews dresses for big companies for a pittance. Yet even this shrewdly observed film, which so matter-of-factly links Ana's immigrant family with her working-class limitations, invents a fairy tale to catapult her upward.

She has graduated from high school without having applied to colleges, but a sympathetic Hispanic teacher at her Beverly Hills school (how she got there the film never explains) writes a letter to his friend, the dean of Columbia University, who magically admits Ana at the last minute with a full scholarship. Tell that to all the parents of students hiring tutors and sweating out college admissions.

What these movies reveal is not just film's addiction to fantasy, which audiences expect and embrace, but also to the Big Lie that class is meaningless in American life. Beneath the fairy dust of "Maid in Manhattan" and the grittiness of "Real Women Have Curves" is a similar message: not that America is a classless society, but that class is as fluid as water and upward mobility a cinch.

The idea, of course, goes back to the Founding Fathers' egalitarian goals, and quickly became so ingrained in the national mythos that what Tocqueville wrote in 1840 could stand as the motto for the J. Lo movie as well as its ancestors like "Sabrina" and "Working Girl": "At any moment a servant may become a master." The amalgam of American idealism and rags-to-riches dreams is irresistible.

But that persistent idea ignores the realities of today's economy and research about social mobility. The aristocratic politician Ralph Fiennes plays in "Maid in Manhattan" precisely fits the profile described by the Princeton economist Alan B. Krueger in a November article in The New York Times, which said that new studies show it takes an average of five or six generations to change a family's economic position, and that wealth tends to linger in families. Such inherited wealth helps create political dynasties like that of the Bushes and of the Fiennes character - an assemblyman, a senator's son running for his father's seat, and not the kind of guy likely to take up with a maid. As Mr. Krueger added in an interview, "Recent trends in income distribution have made upward mobility less likely" than it was even 20 years ago.

And such research isn't brand new. As Kevin Phillips says in "Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich," published last year, the increasing gap between the median American family income and the richest 1 percent has been "a point of national discussion for over a decade." By the turn of the 21st century, he writes, the United States "had also become the West's citadel of inherited wealth."

"Aristocracy," he adds, "was a cultural and economic fact." When films choose to examine class, though, the issue is still seen in terms that are backward-looking, simplistic or fantastic. "8 Mile," which treats the trailer-park life of the Eminem character with sobering realism, is a fierce anomaly. More typically films are as flat-footed about class as last year's preachy drama "John Q," in which Denzel Washington's beleaguered factory worker holds a hospital hostage until his son is given an expensive heart transplant. It turns out his gun was never loaded. Poor is good and noble; wealth makes people mean. And "John Q" was rare in treating class and money seriously.

In comedies, the rich are everywhere as caricatured villains, nasty and small-minded. In "Maid in Manhattan," Natasha Richardson plays a wealthy viper who chases the Fiennes character. And his heroism exists in his ability to ignore his own class and everyone else's. He's so down-to-earth, he walks his own dog, just like a poor person (this movie's sign of humanity) and is able to appreciate Marisa's "genuine" self even after she has replaced her borrowed Dolce & Gabbana suit with her maid's uniform. "What we do does not define who we are," says Bob Hoskins as the hotel's chief butler, in one of the movie's many hollow aphorisms.

A similar equation of money and meanness underlies the romantic comedy "Sweet Home Alabama," in which Melanie, the fashion designer played by Reese Witherspoon, rejects New York and her rich fiancé for Alabama and the poor husband she left behind. At first she calls her soon-to-be-ex-husband a "dumb stubborn redneck" and he calls her "hoity-toity," but that's just their pallid echo of a Tracy-Hepburn battle before they swoon into each other's arms.

More telling, her fiancé's vile, disapproving mother is the mayor of New York, a figure of unlikely glamour played by Candice Bergen. "What do you suggest I do, Mom? Dump her for being poor?" he asks, even though Melanie has become a Manhattan sophisticate and was never poverty-stricken to begin with.

"There is nothing wrong with being poor," the mayor says. "I get elected by poor people." (There are particularly monstrous mothers in these films, but that's another issue.)

As it happens, while Melanie was becoming a fashion star, the ex-husband was building a successful designer-glass business back home, but she doesn't know that when she decides she still loves him. Factoring in money would undercut her nobility.

And his economic rise is itself revealing. He becomes a success to prove himself to Melanie, and gives the film a faint stab at realism. (Would the audience have bought her return to a redneck life?) But he still dresses and acts like his poor, good-old-boy self - a sign of integrity and character, this film's equivalent of Ralph Fiennes walking his dog.

While movie characters are busy zooming up and down the social ladder, some thoughtful television series are sending a more credible message: that upward mobility happens one rung at a time, and is fraught with problems and anxieties. The finest example is "The Sopranos," which has always been precise about its characters' social positions. Tony and Carmela have proudly sent their daughter, Meadow, to Columbia University, a huge yet plausible social step up. But unlike Ana in "Real Women," Meadow Soprano has nouveau-riche parents paying her way.

In a painfully realistic scene this season, Meadow's parents come to dinner at the apartment she shares with college friends. It is instantly evident how badly Tony and Carmela fit in, with their gold chains and parochial attitudes. One roommate is descended from Spanish royalty. "My daughter's an Italian princess; that count?" Tony asks. During a literary discussion Carmela argues angrily, "I'm sorry, but 'Billy Budd' is not a homosexual book!" and mistakenly thinks the critic Leslie Fiedler is a woman. Meadow's own social status is precariously balanced, between her upscale roommates and her gauche parents.

Sometimes even a fluffy sitcom like "George Lopez" can see upward mobility as a difficult maneuver, full of repercussions. Mr. Lopez plays a fictional George who is promoted from factory worker to manager. Suddenly he is his mother's and his best friend's boss, and struggles to read management manuals at night. Yet the Mexican-American working-class hero still finds himself one-upped by his well-off, better-educated Cuban father-in-law, as the show savvily hints that ethnicity and class are not simple categories. (It's a coincidence that Mr. Lopez also plays the teacher who changes Ana's fortunes in "Real Women"; or maybe that's a comment on the relatively small pool of Hispanic actors filmmakers choose from.)

Television is not better or more astute at tackling social issues; it's just that series, unlike movies, can't transform people's lives with a glass slipper week after week. And while there is a history of working-class television heroes, from "The Honeymooners" through "The King of Queens," addressing upward mobility with the clarity of "The Sopranos" is still rare.

On big or small screens, it may be the shadow stories that are most revealing about class. In "8 Mile" and "Maid in Manhattan," the stars never entirely disappear into their characters. Eminem deliberately echoes his real-life story, in which rapping becomes his escape from Detroit's factories and trailer parks. "Maid" is built around Ms. Lopez's glamorous presence. She came from a lower middle class family but her upward mobility has been especially spectacular. When her maid character puts on her borrowed jewels and clothes, she does not look like a dressed-up version of Marisa but like Jennifer Lopez, the woman with the flashing rings and designer clothes and trophy fiancé, Ben Affleck. And although she does not sing on the movie's soundtrack, her recording "Jenny From the Block" bluntly expresses the film's message, conflating J. Lo and Marisa: "Don't be fooled by the rocks I got, I'm still, I'm still Jenny from the block."

That emphasis on humble character obscures the film's deeper message. For Eminem and Jennifer Lopez, success as a music star catapulted them out of the modest past into the rich and famous present. When films persist in seeing social mobility as an issue of money, they are looking in the wrong direction. The real moral of these fairy tales is that Americans can vault out of one class into another; what does it is that great equalizer, show-business fame.

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