

This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of The Times.

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Giants Die-Hard Takes One for the Team

By MANOHLA DARGIS

The little man at the center of the spasmodically funny and bleak love story ["Big Fan"](#) doesn't come with a halo slung over his head. His speeches are written in ballpoint with a heavy hand and delivered with bleats and bellows on the radio. (The words are so deeply inscribed on the page you could read them by touch.) He doesn't come with a fanfare and, to judge by the square, squat cut of his jib, he's an unlikely contender. He's a regular guy or as close to regular as any 35-year-old can possibly be who sleeps under a poster of his favorite football star while tucked under a coverlet imprinted with the names of [N.F.L.](#) teams.

As its title suggests, "Big Fan" is about the love that speaks its name, though also often shrieks it in rock arenas, sports stadiums and other public places of worship. That love can be a beautiful, touching thing: I still remember [John Belushi](#) kindly taking the time to sign an autograph that I soon threw away. I just wanted the contact with someone I adored (and being a teenager, I had no idea of its possible market value). There's a kind of grace in that kind of exchange, as the idol recognizes the supplicant and, if only during the seconds it takes to scrawl a name on a scrap of paper, comes down to earth with the rest of us.

An inability to recognize that love gives "Big Fan" its igniting moment. One evening while chowing down on pizza in Staten Island, two friends, Paul ([Patton Oswalt](#)) and Sal (Kevin Corrigan), notice Paul's favorite Giants player, the fictional Quantrell Bishop (Jonathan Hamm), gassing up his S.U.V. Giddy with excitement, the friends start tailing Bishop. They spend much of their days and most of their solitary nights obsessing about the Giants, swapping stories about the team's triumphs and defeats like war veterans, so following him seems natural, even if it means entering unknown territory like Manhattan. (Where, an incredulous Paul marvels, there are no parking spaces.) Then Bishop discovers he's been shadowed and flies into a rage, unleashing all the furious energy that makes him so magnificent on the field.

Paul ends up in the hospital, his head wrapped in bandages. Much of what ensues involves his coming to painful terms with the horror of that violent night, a reckoning that upends his life and a favorite late-evening ritual: his calls into a local sports radio show. These broadcast interludes are the high point of his day, week, perhaps life, giving "Paul from Staten Island," as he's called, the chance to advocate on behalf of the Giants while trash-talking the competition. Reading from a notepad and pouring all his libidinal energy into the task, he drops statistics, predicts plays and taunts the enemy, his voice alive with swagger and heat. More than an enthusiast, he is a defender of the faith.

Mr. Oswalt, a standup comic who also voiced Remy the rat in the Pixar animation ["Ratatouille,"](#) seems to expand physically during these scenes, almost as if his love for his team made him a giant too. He puffs out his chest and rocks a bit, his voice ebbing and flowing with oratory grandiloquence. There's no one around,

save for his mother (Marcia Jean Kurtz) in the bedroom next door who, borrowing a favorite strategy from Rupert Pupkin's mom, occasionally yells at him to shut up. But Paul has an audience, including the admiring Sal, who alone in his own apartment, takes visible, somewhat baffled pride in his friend's radio performances, smiling along to every beat. Being a big fan also makes Paul into something of a celebrity.

The writer Robert Siegel, here making his debut as a director, doesn't push the analogy. One of the pleasures of this agreeably low-key and modest film is that he isn't selling a message or trying to wring a grand metaphor out of his humble material: he's created a somewhat simple story about a man who turns out to be rather less simple than he first appears. Unlike his script for ["The Wrestler,"](#) with its embarrassment of clichés and bucket of tears, the screenplay for "Big Fan" avoids sentimentality without abandoning sentiment. Paul might make you squirm, but Mr. Siegel refuses to sell him out so you can feel more comfortable with his eccentricities, no small thing in contemporary independent cinema.

Working with the cinematographer Michael Simmonds, Mr. Siegel finds a suitably grubby visual look for the film, which employs handheld camerawork that alternately puts Paul at an analytical distance and draws him close. (Only when Paul dreams of Bishop do the colors pop.) The unremarkable settings include the gloomy parking lot where Paul works and the much larger stadium parking lot where he and Sal watch Giant games on a TV run off a car engine. Like Paul's bedroom, these emptied-out, liminal spaces in which other people are forever coming and going can seem terribly lonely, even sad. But to feel sorry for him is to miss the point of "Big Fan," which is that a life filled with so much generous love needs no pity.

"Big Fan" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). Salty language and self-love.

BIG FAN

Opens on Friday in New York and Philadelphia.

Written and directed by Robert Siegel; director of photography, Michael Simmonds; edited by Joshua Trank; music by Philip Watts; production designer, Sharoz Makarechi; produced by Jean Kouremetis and Elan Bogarin; released by First Independent Pictures. In Manhattan at the Angelika Film Center, Mercer and Houston Streets, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: [Patton Oswalt](#) (Paul Aufiero), Kevin Corrigan (Sal), [Michael Rapaport](#) (Philadelphia Phil), Marcia Jean Kurtz (Theresa Aufiero), Matt Servitto (Detective Velardi), Gino Cafarelli (Jeff Aufiero), Serafina Fiore (Gina Aufiero), Polly Humphreys (Christine), Jonathan Hamm (Quantrell Bishop) and Scott Ferrall (Sports Dogg).

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