

Review: A Most Beautiful Thing — Movies for the Rest of Us with Bill Newcott

Bill Newcott reviews a documentary about the nation's first all African American high school rowing team.

[Bill Newcott](#) July 30, 2020



Richard Schultz/50 Eggs Films (provided by Bill Newcott)

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A Most Beautiful Thing

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Run Time: 1 hour 35 minutes

Narrator: Common

Director: Mary Mazzio

Now streaming on XFINITY VOD; on Peacock September 1; on Amazon Prime October 14.

The best documentaries lull you into thinking they're taking you for a nice float on a lazy stream — then abruptly suck you into a chasm of Class 5 rapids that have you holding on for dear life.

That's the kind of ride we get in director Mary Mazzio's new film, which starts out as the inspiring tale of America's first all-African-American public high school rowing team — but has much more on its mind than warm feelies.

It's the 1990s on the West Side of Chicago, where gang violence is tearing apart the student body of Manley High School. Enter a white Chicago businessman named Ken Alpart, who naively convinces administrators that what the school really needs is a rowing team. He puts a sleek crew shell on display in the cafeteria, offers free pizza to anyone who signs up — and waits to see who comes through the door.

What he gets is a random collection of rival gang members, kids barely holding onto their lives, much less their grades. We meet them in the present day: Grown men, now nearly 40, scarred by their harrowing youths. Foremost among them is Arshay Cooper, who recalls for us his daily adventure walking five blocks to school — and having to wear his baseball cap a different way each block, so as not to get jumped by the local street gang.

The guys laugh as they recall their first time sitting in the low, easily-tipped boat — terrified they might end up in the water.

Some were ready to quit before they got started until, as Cooper recalls, he asked them, "How can you deal with gunshots all day long in your neighborhood and you're scared to sit in a *boat*?"

From here the narrative seems to be going just as we've hoped: On the water, the guys find a peace they've never known before. The former sworn enemies become a team. They enter their first competition, fail miserably, but learn from their mistakes. Finally, at the biggest race of the year, they not only earn the respect of other rowers, but they are celebrated by the entire city of Chicago.

It's an engaging, feel-good story that seems tailor made for a Hollywood remake — you could probably do the casting yourself.

But something seems a little off here: We're barely halfway through the film's run time, and the kids are already graduating from high school. They say farewell to their rowing adventure. Everyone goes their separate ways.

Now what?

It is now 2018, and the old teammates have just learned that an assistant coach from their high school days has suddenly died. They gather for the funeral, and Cooper hatches an audacious plan: Why not have a reunion row? It doesn't take long for everyone to get on board with the idea.

It's a decision that makes the second half of *A Most Beautiful Thing* even more inspiring than the first. For one thing, virtually none of the guys is anywhere near rowing shape. For another, it goes without saying none of the kids went on to Ivy League rowing glory; they returned to the 'hood where the familiar litany of misfortune awaited many of them: drugs, crime, poverty, and imprisonment. Skillfully and respectfully, Mazzio unfolds each man's history, exploring the inner city dynamics that stacked the deck against them from the start (she cites a study that reports children from neighborhoods like these suffer higher rates of PTSD than combat soldiers).

Still, after a rocky start, the old teammates rediscover their rhythm. Cooper — who wrote the book on which this film is based, is a sought-after motivational speaker and has become something of a legend in the rowing community — even enlists Olympic rowing coach Mike Teti to whip them into shape.

But Cooper has more than a rowing reunion in mind. Recalling how the sport brought gang rivals together, he hatches an outrageous notion: Why not invite four members of the Chicago Police Department to row with them?

Now, Mazzio has just spent the last hour or so illustrating the tortured relationship between the cops and the 'hood. At this very moment, one of the guys is wearing an ankle bracelet after a run-in with the law. But they trust Cooper and reluctantly agree, leading to some of the most remarkable scenes of awkwardly effective bridge building you'll ever see.

Finally, the team decides to enter one last official race, returning to the waters where they found high school glory. By now we're beyond worrying about whether they'll win or lose. We're all friends here.

It's hard to imagine a more stormy sea than the one this country is navigating right now, but the inspiring men from Manley High School have a couple of lessons for us all: First, don't assume that everyone who's not on your side is your enemy. And second, it's possible to find common cause with just about anyone, even if you have to keep them at oar's length.

Featured image: Richard Schultz/50 Eggs Films