THE STREETSWEEPER

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Starring Paul Michael, Michael Cavalieri, Kehli O'Byrne, John Capodice, Joe Ruskin, Lira Angel and Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs. Directed, written and produced by James Hill. Distributor-Hillcrest Entertainment. Drama. Rated "R". Running time: 109 min.

Boasting production values far beyond its meager budget and a heart that should be the envy of the indie film world, writer/director/producer James Hill's "The Streetsweeper" offers a warm yet sobering look at the vagaries of life, family, broken dreams and unexpected hopes.

A timely, philosophical tonic for troubled times, "The Streetsweeper" asks some of the same questions of the present generation that "It's a Wonderful Life" posed to the post-World War II set. Its very different conclusions, however, are both surprising and provocative.

Veteran Broadway star Paul Michael delivers an Oscar-worthy performance as Enzo Morelli, a cheerful sweeper driver who, decades earlier, gave up a promising career as an opera singer to support his wife and young son, Joey--the first of many sacrifices to follow. Today, Enzo lives a life of near-poverty, having long since cashed in his pension and sold most of his belongings to put Joey through Harvard in fulfillment of a promise made to his dying wife. But he takes it all in stride because Joey (Michael Cavalieri), due home soon for a visit, is about to graduate. There's just one hitch--Joey still believes that scholarships paid his way.

"The Streetsweeper" marks the culmination of a six-year labor of love for Hill, a commitment that shines through in virtually every frame. Though the scenario offers numerous chances to follow paths tried and true, Hill repeatedly resists temptation, leading audiences into emotional territory that less courageous filmmakers routinely shun. And while the result is ultimately uplifting, audiences will not emerge unscathed--sacrifice is never an easy theme, and Hill ventures no facile answers to the tough, heart-rending dilemmas. And yet, "The Streetsweeper" still manages to deliver a soaring sense of crowd-pleasing euphoria, an affirmation that joy can find a home in even the most troubled of circumstances.

First-rate supporting performances from longtime character actors John Capodice and Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs round out the fine achievement.-***Wade Major***