



# Running On Empty

Study Guide **Brendan Maher**

fresh film festival 2005 **1**

## Running On Empty

### Running On Empty

dir. Sidney Lumet/USA/111mins/1988

#### Cast

**Christine Lahti** Annie Pope/  
Cynthia Manfield

**River Phoenix** Danny Pope/  
Michael Manfield

**Judd Hirsch** Arthur Pope/  
Paul Manfield

**Jonas Abryz** Harry Pope/  
Stephen Manfield

**Martha Plimpton** Lorna Phillips

**Ed Crowley** Mr Phillips

**L.M. Kit Carson** Gus Winant

**Steven Hill** Donald Patterson

**Augusta Dabney** Abigail Patterson

**David Margulies** Dr Jonah Reiff

#### Production

**Costume Designer** Anna Hill Johnstone

**Production Design** Philip Rosenberg

**Art Director** Robert Guerra

**Casting** Todd M. Thaler

**Foley artist** Marko A. Costanzo

**Sound re-recording mixer**

Tom Fleischman

**Sound mixer** James J Sabat

**Original Music** Tony Mottola

**Editor** Andrew Mondshein

**Cinematographer** Gerry Fisher

**Screenplay** Naomi Foner

**Producer** Griffin Dunne, Amy Robinson

**Executive Producers**

Naomi Foner, Burt Harris

**Director** Sidney Lumet

**Production Companies**

Double Play, Lorimar Film  
Entertainment

## Introduction

A deliberate act, to disrupt the work of a napalm laboratory, has far reaching consequences for student radicals Arthur and Annie Pope. A janitor is injured in the attack and the pair find themselves on the FBI's Most Wanted List. In order to protect their two-year-old son, they go underground, taking on new names and new identities. They move from town to town, to keep a step ahead of the authorities.

*Running on Empty* opens 15 years later. The Pops are still on the run and their son, Danny is now a teenager. He has a brother, 10 year-old Harry. 'Normal' family life has been sacrificed for a political cause, that has led nowhere. Now Danny must make a choice, whether to follow his talent for music and go to college or have that opportunity curtailed by the need to keep the family together.

Director Sidney Lumet said *Running on Empty* was a hard film to classify: 'It's about the consequences of our actions and the dynamics of what makes a family.'

The story however deals with a simpler theme; an event that happens in all families - the moment or realisation that a child is now an adult and must be allowed to make their own decisions.

## Director

Sidney Lumet's pedigree made him the perfect choice as director of *Running on Empty*. Born in 1924, Lumet was a child actor on Broadway, fought in World war II and worked in television and theatre upon returning. In 1957 he made his directorial debut with *12 Angry Men* which was nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award.

Lumet brought to the screen a number of well known theatrical works

including Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* and Arthur Miller's *A View from A Bridge* (both 1962). He has become known a strong director on projects of social significance such as *Serpico* (1973) which looked at corruption in the American police force, *Network* (1976), a film which satirised the world of television and the desperate search for ratings and *The Verdict* (1982) in which a struggling lawyer pushes a malpractice case for his own economic benefit.

Lumet was given an Honorary Oscar in 2005 for his "brilliant services to screenwriters, performers and the art of the motion picture."

## First Look

Before you see a film you will most likely see the poster for the film and have some pieces of information about the film.

The title of the film *Running on Empty* is a phrase taken from the automobile industry which suggests that a car is operating on a very low level of petrol.





*From the information you have, what do you think this could mean in relation to the story?*

*Look at the poster for the film. It's designed using a torn photograph of a family, with the phrase 'Wanted by the FBI' stamped on it. What does the use of photograph and the phrase together suggest to you?*

## **Synopsis**

At a baseball game, 17 year-old Danny Pope strikes out. Cycling home afterwards, he becomes aware of a black car following, with two men in sunglasses watching him. He doubles

back and cycles to pick up his 10 year-old brother Harry from a run-down house. They wait on the road for their parents Arthur and Annie, who pick them up in a van. Danny tells his parents about the car, saying the men inside were 'Feds' (FBI agents).

The family move. In a motel, Harry finds a newspaper which recounts the story of his parents: They are fugitives because fifteen years ago, as radical students, they were involved in the bombing of a chemical factory which made napalm. The janitor was badly injured in the attack. The television news also

recounts their story, suggesting they are armed and dangerous.

Arthur goes to the local library and looks up the obituaries. He finds the name Paul Manfield and takes this identity. The family now take on the name Manfield and change their christian names accordingly. In the city, Arthur swaps vans through a political friend. She tells him that his mother died, three weeks previously. Later, Arthur tells Annie that his family now consists of her and the boys.

Danny begins a new school and shows his skills at the piano to his new teacher. He goes to the teachers



home to play on a Steinway and meets Lorna, his teacher's daughter.

At school, Lorna invites Danny to a recital at their house. Danny wants to go but argues with his father who regards the event as 'bourgeois'. Danny goes anyway and meets Lorna.

Annie has a job as a receptionist at a Doctors office. She is visited by Gus, an underground figure from their past. They go home and talk about the past. Arthur is suspicious of Gus, who is planning to rob a bank. He leaves the house. Gus and Annie talk, both attracted to each other. Annie asks him to go, telling him that the revolution is over. Arthur arrives home drunk.

At Annie's birthday, Lorna arrives and offers a present. It's shell necklace that Danny had found on the beach. The party breaks up in a dance. A few days later, after making

love with Lorna, Danny explains his family story to her.

Danny decides to take an audition at Julliard, a College of Music in New York. He performs well and is accepted. But the school requires his full academic record (this is unavailable due to the series of name changes he has had in his life). Annie is told by the teacher that Danny has been accepted for College. She realises that Danny wishes to leave. She has an emotional reunion with her father. He agrees to take care of Danny while he attends College. Annie arranges through a contact to have false records made for Danny.

Arthur doesn't agree with Danny's plans and decides that the family should move on. He sets a date. Lorna is heartbroken. This date comes early when they find out that Gus has robbed the bank and they may be

linked to the robbery. They decide to leave instantly. Arthur and Annie pick up the boys. Danny delays saying goodbye to Lorna. Arthur, Annie and Harry wait for him. On the radio, they hear that Gus has been killed by police in a shoot-out. This means that some of the pressure is off them. Arthur tells Danny that he can go to College. The three drive off leaving Danny alone with his future before him.

## Second Look

You've now seen the actual film. Any preconceived expectations you would have had have now been clarified by this viewing.

*What did you think of the film?  
What is the overriding theme of the film?  
Does the film centre on any one character or is it the story of a family?*

Do you regard the family as criminals as the Government does?  
 What do you think of the parents Arthur and Annie in the story. Are they wise, foolish. Should they have handed themselves in?

## Family Relationships/ Authority

One of the secondary themes of the film is the notion of authority and how power is wielded within both society and the family. Weber in defining authority: states it 'as power which is recognised as legitimate and justified by both the powerful and the powerless.' There are three subdivisions:

- 1) **Traditional authority:** which simply derives from long-established habits and social structures. The right of hereditary monarchs to rule furnishes an obvious example.
- 2) **Charismatic authority:** a political or religious figure creates or captures the mood of a society and becomes a figurehead for change. Authority is offered to this person by their followers.
- 3) **Legal-rational authority:** depends for its legitimacy on formal rules, usually written down, and often very complex.

The legal-rational idea of Authority is utilised by modern societies. These rules are agreed upon by the people in these societies through the judicial system and governmental structures and are initially outlined in a constitution. In *Running on Empty* Arthur and Annie find that their belief system is at odds with this Authority and they believe that this authority has become corrupted e.g. their Government through it's army is napalming villages in Vietnam. Authority in the family situation is a mix of traditional and legal rational.

## Radicalism in the 1960's

Following the Second World War (1939-1945) the return of a large number of males to their home countries and a strengthening economy triggered a 'Baby boom' - a large increase in the numbers of children born in the late 1940's and early 1950's This phenomena happened across America, Europe and Asia. This generation came of age in the 1960's, which meant that a substantial proportion of the population were young people. This fact, linking in with a number of social and political causes and a fundamental cultural change set this younger generation in opposition to their parents and figures of authority.

In America, the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 in the early Sixties had suggested an era of hope, however this was dashed by his subsequent assassination in 1963 and that of his brother Robert in 1968. The eventual collapse of the Johnson administration that followed JFK and the Nixon presidency which ended in resignation following the Watergate scandal in 1974 did little to stabilise matters

The nation became embroiled in bitter disputes. Civil rights for the African American community, with Martin Luther King as the leader of the non-violent movement for change, became a major issue. As the decade went on, the non-violent movement was splintered into radical offshoots such as the Black Muslims and the militant Black Panther Party.

The rise in opposition to the Vietnam War, and resistance to conscription ('the draft') culminated in a massive protest in 1969. The antiwar movement was initially based on the older 1950s 'Peace movement' controlled by the Communist Party USA, but by the mid '60s this centred on the growing young population in university campuses.

The apparent slowness of change caused some people to pursue radical methods to achieve change in a swifter manner. In 'Running on Empty' - Arthur and Annie Pope are such people. Their deliberate action of bombing a chemical factory shows that they had pursued radical means to effect change.

In the social sphere, the allied increase in use of recreational drugs, a breakdown in what was considered conventional sexual morality and the cultural change in the arts, especially music compounded the gap between generations.

### Find out what you can about the following people or events:

- 1) The Civil Rights Movement
- 2) The Black Panther Party
- 3) The American New Left
- 4) Kent State University Shootings

Biological connection, tradition, habit, formalised laws and an underlying need for survival, all encourage us when we are children to accept the authority of our parents or guardians. However, as teenagers, we begin to challenge this authority, in preparation

for adulthood.

*Identify the relationships within the film both in the state/individual sense and within the family structures. Within these relationships, can you assess an underlying power struggle and the stage it is at?*

## **Fitting In**

The idea of peer pressure is often discussed in relation to teenagers. When young people are thought to be engaging in antisocial activity, this term is often used to explain away a group compliance with that activity, which is based on the individuals fear of being excluded. *Running on Empty* gives this issue an interesting twist. Danny and his family must fit in in order to survive. They must not bring attention to themselves or else they will be noted as being different. Danny must embrace school norms and not stand out. This is very evident in the scene where he attends his first class in his new school. However, Danny's difficulty is that his talent makes him stand out.

Naomi Foner, the screenwriter of *Running on Empty* says: 'the way you make yourself inconspicuous is by being as ordinary as possible. It was very important to have them (the family) living on the edge of middle-class society. That way they were not conspicuous for either being very wealthy or terribly poor.'

*Look for examples for ways the Popes try to make themselves fit in. Contrast these with the things they must still do covertly in order to survive.*

## **Style**

The style of the film is naturalistic. The emphasis of the story is on the interpersonal relations. Lumet does not develop any overt action set-pieces because the drama of the film is held within the Danny and the family's dilemma.

The film also avoids dealing with the political issues mentioned. Producer Griffin Dunne says: 'We didn't set out to make a movie about: "was it all worth it or did we fight in vain?" and we aren't going to be able to answer those questions or resolve any of the anger that people have about that time. *Running on Empty* is about the consequences of that decade set within a family.'

*Contrast the style of the film with other films dealing a similar theme. Look specifically at **Enemy of the State** (dir. Tony Scott/1998)*

## **Style: Cinematography**

Reviewer Karl Rackwitz notes that: 'the style of the film is not as dark as some of the work Lumet has made with cinematographer Andrzej Bartkowiak (*Prince of the City*, *The Verdict*). In *Running on Empty*, the photography by Gerry Fisher (who has an especially good eye for the poetry of the night) seems quite natural at first sight, but it is also characterised by a subtle employment of unusual camera perspectives and framing. This stylistic conception reflects the fact that the Popes try to live a relatively "normal" life, which is made very difficult by their situation, on the other hand.'

## **Style: Framing the Scene**

Jay Boyer in his book 'Sidney Lumet' observes: '...While one might argue the camera placements lend an inauthentic quality to what we see, such inauthenticity underscores a central concern of the film. Consider the birthday party. The camera seems to be so close to the characters

sitting around the table that it cannot hold them in view as a group. If characters get up from the table and move, they seem about to collide with each other or the furniture. The small dining room looks unnaturally shallow. Our vision of a character may be clumsily obscured by another character, or by some miscellaneous party ornament; characters at the periphery of Lumet's frame are in danger of slipping out of the frame entirely. Nothing appears balanced. [...] There is certainly a sense of inauthenticity to be found in the film, but whether this is due to Lumet's ineptness as a director is subject to debate. Nothing in the Pope household is real. Everything can be cast off at any moment.'

*Do you think this is a correct assessment of this scene? Is this idea of inauthenticity suggested by the filmmakers in any other scenes?*

## **Conclusion**

*Running on Empty* is presented as a family drama against the backdrop of a political event which took place in the past. This event has kept the Pope Family's life in a constant turmoil for fifteen years. The emergence of their son into adulthood means that they have to reassess their family structure. Screenwriter Naomi Foner points out that the film is: 'the story of what happens to every family when parents have to let their child go. Parenting is the only love story that to end successfully, means that the participants must ultimately leave each other.'