

# A life's labors lost

## About Schmidt, directed by Alexander Payne

Joanne Laurier  
17 January 2003

*About Schmidt* directed by Alexander Payne; written by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, based on the novel by Louis Begley

*About Schmidt* is about Warren Schmidt, a middle-aged, Middle American in a post-career crisis. The latest film by Alexander Payne (*Election*, *Citizen Ruth*) scrutinizes features of America's social fabric with a relatively sharp eye.

The opening series of images of downtown Omaha, Nebraska, narrows down to a high-rise where 66-year-old Warren Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) sits catatonically in his office amidst boxes containing the labor of his lifetime of service as an actuary for the Woodmen of the World Insurance Company. He is watching the clock strike the last minute of his tenure at the company. The moment, however, does not signal any kind of emancipation.

Coworkers toast Warren's achievements at a sad, little retirement party, celebrating a "life that has mattered." One day after the accolades, Warren's sees his boxes of papers going out with the trash. He then starts to focus more attention on his wife of 42 years, Helen (June Squibb), and begins to realize that she is as much a nuisance as a fixture in his Lazy-Boy-furnished, Hummel-filled suburban home.

With the fruits of his professional life in a dumpster and Helen suddenly keeling over dead on top of a vacuum cleaner, Warren, who has spent a major part of his life calculating the lifespan of others, is forced to kick-start a new life. Alone and hapless in the ruins of his existence, he responds to a television advertisement and sponsors an African child for \$22 a month. His letters to six-year-old Tanzanian Ndugu Umbo become the film's voice-over mechanism through which Schmidt reveals his inner thoughts and feelings.

Warren sets out in his 35-foot Winnebago to attend the wedding of his only child Jeannie (Hope Davis) in Denver, undergoing an odyssey that leaves him wondering: "What difference has my life made to anyone?" And concluding: "None that I can think of."

There is something to the film. Payne's bittersweet comedy is the study of a man who has lived according to the officially approved prescription: he got married, raised a family, earned a decent living, lived in a decent house and retired on a decent pension. He has existed in a typically self-absorbed routine for decades in a typical middle-class neighborhood in a typical American city. Payne's film poses the question: why is this picture so unappealing?

The portrayal of Omaha in the opening sequence is significant.

The brief images of a normal-looking city are pregnant with a harshness, a grimness and an alienating air that help create one of the most insightful moments in the film. They silently chronicle the uncomfortable truth that so much of contemporary, normal-looking America is harsh, grim and unrelentingly alienating.

Warren takes to heart the company's self-serving myth that the insurance industry—one of the most parasitical and pervasive of all—is the trailblazer in society. He likes to explain that the name "Woodmen" refers to men cutting through the thicket of society. Perceptively puncturing this notion, Payne stages the retirement party for Warren as one of those buffoonish, nearly meaningless rituals that attempt to put a human face on corporate America. Dominating are two common types: the sycophantic, ambitious replacement who, in the future, will smilingly destroy any residual evidence of Warren's contributions, and the seasoned colleague and friend, Ray (Len Cariou), who drunkenly delivers a canned speech, revealing his own pathos and lack of awareness.

The scenes that bring out the essence of Warren's apparently successful, white-collar career are on the mark. Ray's comments, spoken quite sincerely—"What matters is that you devoted your life to something meaningful"—have a tragic dimension. The truth is that Warren's job (and life) has been more on the order of a holding pattern or time killer. It has not been productive or useful in any significant fashion. How many other wasted lives are there in America, one of the most wasteful of all societies? The film points to the colossal and criminal dissipation of human energy and resources.

The manner in which human beings are ground up by the corporate world is linked by the filmmaker to the fate of the prize-winning Omaha steer. Photos of blue-ribbon steers decorate the "steakhouse," the location for the shabbily conventional retirement party. These animals are first fattened and feted, then sent to slaughter to become future Omaha steaks. The analogy is not lost on Warren when, on the road to Denver, he eyes such a beast being carted away presumably to a packinghouse.

What has Warren's career enabled him to achieve? His conventional marriage has become a nightmare. He has fathered, though not really parented, a bright, attractive daughter, who is already becoming resentful about a life centered on a dead-end job and an impending marriage to a dead-end man. Warren's house, his "castle" and barometer of social status, is a mausoleum of endless collections of meaningless objects. In short, Schmidt's ride on the assembly line of success has brought him an insular,

rather soulless existence where kitsch replaces culture, and emotional deprivation holds sway.

And what are the prospects for the younger generation? Although talented and well educated, Warren's daughter Jeannie is a shipping clerk and her uncultured and untalented fiancé, Randall (Dermot Mulroney), is a waterbed salesman. Jeannie is a well-drawn character and, despite Warren's claims to the contrary in his letters to Ndugu, knows that Randall is not much. She rightly feels her life is slipping away and that her opportunities are dwindling. At this rate, she will end up a poorer version of her parents.

Randall, with his silly-looking mullet and penchant for pyramid-scheme businesses, bumbles along with barely a clue. All his "participation" and "good attendance" awards, pitifully displayed in his mother's home, deliver the message that if he is something of a hopeless case, it is not for lack of trying.

Payne has a sharp eye for detail, but doesn't always know what to do with the data. *About Schmidt* is primarily aimed at legitimate targets, but ridicule—laced with a dose of smugness and snobbery—is, at times, dished out too liberally (Warren's wife receives more than her fair share). The filmmaker does not entirely grasp that to make fun of a society's idiosyncrasies, cruelties and deformities is one thing, to ridicule their victims is another.

Despite the mockery, however, there is not a truly malicious character depiction in the film. The focus on traditional Midwesterners is widened as swipes are taken at the countercultural types in Denver. Randall's mother (Kathy Bates) is a bit exaggerated as the free-spirited bohemian, but Randall's speechifying father (Howard Hesseman), adorned by a young, Asian wife, is a nicely-textured personality. To his credit, Payne seems to have affection for those who fall victim to the chimerical pursuit of wealth and success in both the upper middle class neighborhood of Omaha and the less affluent one in Denver.

Payne is at pains to point out the good intentions of the average American, even when those prove woefully inadequate. The encounter between Schmidt and an immensely cheery couple in a recreational vehicle park seems to illustrate this gap, as well as suggesting that a prudish, quasi-Victorian morality lingers on in "Middle America." When the husband goes out for more beer and the wife offers him some long-overdue verbal sympathy, Schmidt kisses her rather sweetly. Instead of merely brushing him off as is obviously possible, she leaps to her feet, outraged and indignant, as though he had committed the worst possible outrage.

Jeannie and Randall's wedding together with the retirement party scene, which more or less book-end the film, give *About Schmidt* much of its real depth. As opposed as Warren is to Jeannie's union with the "nincompoop," his restrained speech at the wedding indicates that, for the first time, Schmidt has opened not just his wallet but his heart to his pained daughter. The scene is evidence that Warren is capable of making human contact.

On the way back to Omaha from Denver, a slightly more enlightened Warren visits a Pioneer Wax Museum with three-dimensional wilderness scenes of the authentic "woodmen"—the westward-bound thicket choppers who really did clear the path in the country—and muses to himself that "the Indians got a raw deal." Warren reveals an awareness that his generation has not

engaged in any such titanic struggles and consequently will not "change the world for the better." In its own way, the film and this scene in particular speak to the stagnant, reactionary character of the last several decades.

Schmidt's journey west, the RV version of the nineteenth century Conestoga wagon trek, has uncovered something about what the worship of free enterprise, business and the market has meant for the human soul. What has been the fate of those who, like Schmidt, have dedicated themselves fully to these gods? As the retired actuary calculates the unhappy answer, he discovers that his letters and money to the African foster child have made some kind of difference.

*About Schmidt* is not a devastating look at American life, but it is a lucid one. A number of its targets are a little easy and the mode of critique contains both sympathy and traces of contempt. As previously mentioned, the portrait of Schmidt's wife is nastily gratuitous and the Bates character is unnecessarily overblown. Also, the letters to Ndugu do not work as the device for communicating insights and information. They seem extraneous and lazily thrown in.

A more serious weakness is that the film's main emphasis is on personal foibles and individual failings, rather than on a failed society and a failed culture. Payne appears torn between a genuine social critique and scorn for those who are less intelligent and cultured. The director is leaving his hometown of Omaha to take up filmmaking in Hollywood, harboring aspirations of becoming a Billy Wilder-type satirist. He faces a good many pitfalls.

At any rate, *About Schmidt* is one of the few current movies that tries honestly to offer social satire and criticism. Payne is looking around at the world; he is not merely navel-gazing as are so many in his field.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**