

# Eight characters in search of an inner life

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*Palindromes*, written and directed by Todd Solondz

*Palindromes*, the latest film by Todd Solondz, tells a moral and political fable in its own peculiar fashion about contemporary American life and politics. Solondz first made his mark with *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), a work that excavated the cruelty and loneliness of suburban reality. The filmmaker has appointed himself, and it does him a certain amount of credit, the chronicler of the marginalized, the despised, the freakish, the humiliated.

His new film, while intriguing and often provocative, is seriously flawed. Solondz, a perceptive, sensitive filmmaker, is hamstrung by the demoralized (and shallow) view that life is a vicious circle without the possibility of any positive evolution or outcome.

*Palindromes* opens with the funeral of Dawn Weiner, the awkward, teenage outcast from *Dollhouse* and moves on to the tale of her 13-year-old cousin, Aviva [whose name of course is a *palindrome*, i.e., a word or sentence which reads the same backward and forward], who since early childhood has wanted nothing more than to be a mother. The protagonist, the only child of affluent, self-centered parents, is attempting to find the unconditional love that has evaded her hitherto. When Aviva becomes pregnant, her liberal, “progressive” mother (Ellen Barkin) obliges the girl to go to an abortion clinic, lecturing her on the physical deformities that can afflict the fetus of a too-youthful childbearer.

Aviva runs away and has a series of encounters, including a sexual liaison with a tormented truck driver. He is connected to a religious fundamentalist couple, the Sunshines—the adoptive parents of a happy brood of unwanted, ill and disfigured children. Aviva finds a certain solace in the evangelical household. As it turns out, Father and Mother Sunshine are in the business of organizing the assassination of abortionists.

Back in her secularist environs, Aviva’s scientific-minded cousin, Mark Weiner (Dawn’s brother), elaborates on his philosophy that DNA and the genetic code preclude a person’s ability to change.

The heroine finds herself suspended between the pro-choice family that crushes choice and the “pro-life” family that kills. This suspension is amplified by the fact that eight different actors play Aviva—females of various shapes, ethnicities and ages (Jennifer Jason Leigh plays one of the 13-year-old Avivas), plus one male. (Solondz points out that avant-garde

filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel have cast multiple players in key roles.)

“Spell it forwards or backwards, it’s always the same.... People always end up the way they started out. No one ever changes,” Mark tells Aviva. Aviva’s experience seems to confirm this nostrum—she is as emotionally and intellectually deficient at the film’s end as she was at its beginning.

In an interview on *Wellspring.com*, Solondz spells out his affinity for Mark’s skewed notion: “Palindrome functions as a loose metaphor for the ways in which we don’t change. Like a palindrome that, instead of developing in different directions, folds back on itself, the self is a part-static thing. It is our ‘palindromic’ nature that the film explores, that part of ourselves that does not change, and that serves as one of the film’s central themes: change vs. stasis.”

The multiple-actor device is employed as a distancing mechanism to better highlight the argument that life’s alterations are mediated through one’s central, immutable core. Paradoxically, whatever Solondz’s conscious purpose may be, this device subverts his argument and suggests instead both human beings’ infinite ability to change and their infinite multi-sidedness.

Aviva’s variability of sex, form and color combines with her relentless travels by foot, by car, by truck, by boat to create the image of someone always on the move and always navigating through treacherous waters. One of the most beautiful and dreamlike sequences in this decidedly non-naturalistic work, “Huckleberry,” is entirely silent, as the only male Aviva (Will Denton) floats down a river in a toy boat.

There is tension between the genuine moments of life and vitality (and humor, including black humor) in the film and its absurd insistence that change is impossible. It is telling that Solondz had to kill off his artistic trade-mark (and alter ego?)—the eternally-ostracized Dawn Weiner—rather than reintroduce the character at a higher stage of personal development.

The adult personalities in *Palindromes* are largely one-dimensional, static, finished products. Each has his or her obsession and pursues it unrelentingly. These characters, like Aviva’s shrill, liberal mother, never fully come to life. They have been dealt with less than justly. Conversely, the adolescents, like Aviva, are underdeveloped and exude an infinite, formless potential. There is no interplay or even

linkage between the two generations. How and why does one turn into the other? One senses that Solondz has not worked this through.

While the use of eight actors to play Aviva imparts to the film its most humane qualities, it also perhaps hints at the filmmaker's inability to conceive of a single performer portraying contradiction and transformation. This is clearly linked to a social outlook. As a whole, the film presents American society as devoid of any internal dynamism.

Is it true, as the film argues, that present reality boils down to what Solondz terms the "anti-anti-choice" between liberals and conservatives who both have their share of strengths and weaknesses? Is the film an unbiased exploration, as Solondz claims, of the moral dimensions and consequences of the positions taken by the two sides? This claim inherently cedes ground to the religious right.

Even the filmmaker is forced to concede that the film does "attack the shibboleths, some of the demonizations, some of the slogans that exist surrounding abortion." But it is permeated with the feeling that anachronistic, self-involved liberals are being overrun by religious fanatics, who despite certain intolerant, murderous activities, at least are prepared to put themselves out there and minister to the needy.

Describing himself as a "devout atheist," Solondz identifies himself with Mark Wiener's fatally deterministic science. "We imagine we're invoking choice when in fact we can act only in accordance with who we are ... if one can accept one's limitations this can be a freeing thing," states the director. This can easily become simply a banal justification for conditioning oneself to and accepting what is.

In an interview with *indiewire.com*, Solondz is explicit about his retrograde and wrongheaded pessimism: "Provided one is capable, one can improve. But as a species we certainly are no more advanced than we were 5,000 years ago, morally speaking. Read the newspaper every day. I can't see how we're an improved species. My movies can't compete with what's on TV. It's the age of 24/7 Terri Schiavo. What could be a greater obscenity or grotesquery? It's there in the paper every day, much harsher than anything I do."

One is tempted to ask, then why bother to challenge anything, through film or otherwise, if this is the case? Indeed, why bother getting up in the morning? There are moods and feelings in *Palindromes* that clearly work in an opposed direction, toward an engagement with life.

The problems at the center of Solondz's film are real ones. He is not, like most contemporary American filmmakers, merely self-indulgent, misanthropic or trivial. However, the prevailing cultural atmosphere affects his work. The moral and cultural regression Solondz refers to in his interview, and alternately mocks and adapts to in his films, is one of the critical phenomena of our time. But a serious artist, the artist of Solondz's caliber or potential, cannot prostrate himself before the difficulties, he or she must tackle the issue head-on, explore

its source.

The artist today in America is obliged to seek an education in social physiognomy not because we socialists say so, or because it will make him or her a more all-rounded person or a better conversationalist, but because it is impossible to advance in art and film today without such an understanding. Without a grasp of the difficulties in recent American social and political development, for example, one simply ends up blaming the population for the present mess.

Solondz recognizes that "we live in a country that is the driving force of capitalism" and that "there's no place in the world where one can experience isolation and loneliness more profoundly." But he more or less leaves it at that. To this point he has failed to follow the logic of his best instincts and penetrate the more profound, i.e., socially derived motives, behind the immediate motives of individuals.

Having lost confidence in the ability of human beings to change the irrational circumstances, Solondz then tries to claim that swimming against the stream is hazardous to one's art. He criticizes films like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake* for secondary weaknesses in their attempts to get beneath the skin of society, for stacking the decks and being too partisan. Whether he realizes or not, Solondz also stacks the decks, but ends up adapting to the right. He bends over backward to find humanism in the artificial and grotesque Sunshine family circle. And even on the question of abortion, the filmmaker seems to be entertaining the notion that there are "arguments on each side." His quasi-neutrality on this question is not attractive.

To be blunt, the key to Solondz's dim view of humanity as unchanging and condemned eternally to repeat its mistakes, is not so difficult to uncover. It lies, above all, in the last reactionary quarter of a century of US history and his being unduly influenced by the circles of demoralized liberals and ex-leftists who see things and America getting perpetually worse, more right-wing, more dominated by fundamentalism, more culturally degraded, without any sign or hope of mass opposition.

Solondz possesses intuition and insight, but he lacks knowledge of society's mainspring, of its historically determined and objective makeup, including the inevitability of a mass radicalization in response to the present crisis. This makes him susceptible to a bad atmosphere and accounts for the pessimism that runs the risk of turning into an adaptation to the apparently perpetual downsliding.



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