

The Savages: Throwing away the aged

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11 February 2008

Written and directed by Tamara Jenkins

“Will you still need me? Will you still feed me when I’m 64?” John Lennon/ Paul McCartney

Coming almost a decade after her 1998 directorial debut with *The Slums of Beverly Hills*, American filmmaker Tamara Jenkins’s new movie, *The Savages*, focuses on the difficulties facing the elderly and the tribulations that confront their adult children caregivers.

Siblings Jon and Wendy Savage (Philip Seymour Hoffman and Laura Linney), scarred by a childhood dominated by a harsh and abusive father and an absentee mother, have conducted their lives not having much contact with one another.

Wendy is the more obvious emotional wreck, while Jon holds himself in check by suppressing his internal life. An aspiring playwright in New York City, Wendy pays the bills by temping, using her working hours to apply for grants (her only successful response has been from a government disaster fund) to finance her latest childhood-obsessed effort, “Wake Me When It’s Over,” which she describes as inspired by the work of Jean Genet and Eugene O’Neill. Her closest attachments are to her cat and ficus plant. Her main relationship is with an unavailable married neighbor, Larry (Peter Friedman).

Meanwhile in Buffalo, Jon, a college professor teaching the drama of social unrest, limps along delivering tepid lectures on didactic theater, writing a book on German playwright Bertolt Brecht and avoiding marriage to his Polish girlfriend, Kasia (Cara Seymour). Although he sobs uncontrollably at the thought of losing Kasia, Jon is incapable of making a commitment that would prevent her from being sent back to Krakow once her visa expires.

A phone call from an upscale retirement community in Arizona disrupts the tenuous equilibrium of their self-centered lives. *The Savages’* long-estranged father, Lenny (Philip Bosco), who for 20 years has been living with his well-off girlfriend, is now suffering from dementia. He has become unmanageable, taking to writing obscenities on the bathroom wall with his feces. (Wendy: “All he has left is his s—! He is acting out with

his s—.”) The death of his longtime companion, and a “pre-nuptial” agreement (although Lenny and his girlfriend were never married), has left him penniless.

The more functional of his two children, Jon, arranges for Lenny to occupy the last available bed in a cramped nursing home in Buffalo (Lenny: “What the hell kind of hotel is this?”). When Wendy protests the dreary surroundings, Jon replies that the two of them are taking better care of Lenny than he ever did of them. The combination of Jon’s resentment, Wendy’s guilt and Lenny’s lack of finances leads to the dismal end of a life in an institution that at best offers “activities you can share with your confused elder on visiting day.” Larry’s offspring prepare themselves for their new role by reading *Elder Care for Dummies*.

It’s not all bad at the Valley View nursing home—which, as is typical of such places, has no view of a valley, or any view whatsoever. “Movie Night” featuring one of Lenny’s favorites, *The Jazz Singer*, goes well until the mostly black staff reacts to Al Jolson’s application of black-face makeup.

In the end, the act of taking care of their father, grudgingly or otherwise, somewhat loosens the chains binding Wendy and Jon’s crippled lives.

The Savages has some genuine and comic moments as it reckons with an unglamorous topic little treated in American cinema. Although Linney is at times a bit too frenetic, Hoffman, uncharacteristically restrained, puts in a steady performance, exhibiting confidence in the script.

The film’s offbeat opening sequence features a surreal retirement community where unusually healthy residents play golf under palm trees and agile seniors in cheerleader outfits gyrate to Peggy Lee’s rendition of “I Don’t Want to Play in Your Yard.”

The rest of the film gets down to the business of showing that the golden years are not so golden after all. In fact, even at middle age, life is pretty tough for the Savages. Wendy chases after surrogate fathers and Jon tries to stay emotionally connected to himself by listening to Lotte Lenya sing “The Solomon Song” from Brecht’s

“The Threepenny Opera.” This, while driving through Buffalo’s bleak, working class neighborhoods.

The film raises the possibility that Wendy and Jon may not be doing much better than a bitter parent who is losing his mind while warehoused in a holding pen. There is something about the siblings’ lives that too is confining and half-lived.

Jenkins’s Wendy is defensive about what she views as her middle class whininess, but is offered no real way out her insularity by the filmmaker other than a suggestion that she continue taking care of animate objects (a crowning example is her rescue of paramour Larry’s aging and ailing dog). While both brother and sister are cultured, this fact is of little use to them. When a figure like Brecht is mentioned, it is generally for show and not serious treatment. As a rule, the literary references are a device to widen, perhaps artificially, the film’s undersized universe.

Unfortunately, the problems Jenkins raises are not simple, but her solutions are. By caring for their parent in the best fashion available to them, Wendy and Jon learn to better take care of themselves. While such things may happen, where is the social component—and it’s a huge one—in this scenario?

Jenkins never addresses the principal reason that conditions are so appalling for a large segment of the senior population. In many ways, Jenkins’s film sidesteps the depth and dimension of the augmenting social disaster facing the elderly, as well as that of their caregivers who must fill a void created by the wholesale governmental demolition of social programs or refusal to offer them in the first place. On top of this is the sordid fact that despite a lifetime of labor, the majority of the population end their working years in poverty or near-poverty.

Although Jenkins’s fictional Valley View—staffed by overworked but caring immigrant workers—is not an ideal location in which to live out one’s days, it’s not the worst either. The reality is that many nursing homes run for profit are deplorable. Each year, thousands of nursing home residents suffer injury and death from preventable causes like malnutrition, dehydration and infected bedsores.

Moreover, while the Savage children sustain a disturbance in their lives with Lenny, it is a disturbance that turns out to be a catalyst for the good, on the whole. The actuality is tougher for others.

The millions of people caring for elderly parents are generally forced to navigate the irrational worlds of medicine, retirement facilities and law, while tackling

attendant emotional difficulties and depleting personal finances in the process. This is expressed in the shocking statistic that, according to the American Association of Retired Persons, the amount of *unpaid* care for the elderly (i.e., care provided by families and others) surpassed government spending on Medicare—the government-paid social insurance program for people 65 years and older—in 2005! This is an indictment of American capitalist society, which throws people on the rubbish heap as soon as they are no longer able to make profits for someone.

The National Alliance for Caregiving points out that hundreds of thousands of dollars are lost in pensions, Social Security benefits and wages when adult children take time off work to care for their parents, with some 91 percent reporting depression.

“Being the ‘parent of your parent’ can unlock your family’s hidden dysfunctions.... Every rivalry you had with your brothers and sisters, every argument you had with your parents, every effort you ever made to become independent can be put to the test once your parents become old and sick,” according to a recent article in *USA Today*.

In addition, the financial inequalities that dominate American society maintain their grip, perhaps tighten their grip, in old age. *The Savages* does mention that without money, Lenny has no option but to be placed into a barebones facility. As in his case, the sudden loss of a mate or the onset of a condition like dementia inevitably lead to damaging changes for the senior and his/her family, with no socially organized structures to lend a hand. The impact of these social problems and dilemmas is far larger in scope than Jenkins portrays in her film.

Nonetheless, *The Savages* underscores in a humane manner how disposable the elderly are in America and how burdened and neglected their caregivers.



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