

Savage Grace: Yet another American tragedy

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Directed by Tom Kalin, screenplay by Howard Rodman, based on the book by Natalie Robins and Steven M.L. Aronson

Savage Grace is a disturbing and painful drama, about an American family unhappy in any number of ways. Screenwriter Howard Rodman and director Tom Kalin (*Swoon*) based their film on the story of Barbara and Brooks Baekeland, the heir to the Bakelite plastics fortune, and their son, Tony, which culminated in a tragic murder in 1972.

We first see the couple in New York in 1946, not long after their son's birth. Barbara (Julianne Moore) is beautiful and vivacious, Brooks (Stephen Dillane) handsome and debonair, as well as something of an intellectual. They dine at the fashionable Stork Club in New York with the likes of Prince Aschwin of Lippe-Biesterfeld, brother of the Netherlands' Prince Bernhard (and an ardent Nazi in the 1930s).

A game is played at the table. "For a million dollars, would you eat a pound of human flesh?" "Would you go to bed with the first person you met after going through a revolving door, for a million dollars?" Brooks nods yes to that, so Barbara declares, more or less, "If that's the way you feel, I'll just go off with the first man that comes along in a car," and she does so, leaving her husband and friends on the sidewalk.

Something about the emptiness, carelessness and potential violence of the relationships comes across here. Unfortunately, these elements are never seriously developed in this rather noncommittal work.

The Baekelands become expatriates. In 1959, in Paris, Tony, age 13, is forced to read passages from the Marquis de Sade out loud to the couple's dinner guests. When the effort fails, Barbara explodes in rage, driving the visitors from the house. At this time, the son confronts smothering affection from his mother, perhaps rather forced, and reserve or contempt from his father, who's convinced the boy is a homosexual.

Some years later, in 1967, the family is staying on Spain's fashionable Costa Brava. Tony (now played by Eddie Redmayne) brings home a girl friend, Blanca (Elena Anaya), much to his parents' delight, although he's far more attracted to boys. Brooks promptly runs off with Blanca, abandoning his family for good. Tony makes childlike efforts to reunite his parents, while his father hides from him.

Barbara begins to unravel. She takes on a "walker," a gay man who accompanies single women. She, her new friend and Tony all end up in bed together one night. In Paris, Barbara attempts suicide (one of numerous attempts), and later has her son apply salve to her stitched up wrists while she lies naked in the bathtub eating ice cream.

By 1972, mother and son are living in a flat in London, and both seem to be collapsing emotionally. Barbara carries on with her hectic social life, still seeing or attempting to see the "best people," but at home she initiates a sexual relationship with her son. Not surprisingly, Tony is drifting into a psychotic state. The final and perhaps inevitable denouement occurs. We learn from titles the fate of those left alive.

Kalin and Rodman treat the deeply troubling events in an intelligent and sensitive manner. The motive force here does not seem to be sensationalism or voyeurism. The performers, especially Moore and Dillane, do well. The work is attractively and carefully filmed. The filmmakers have made a genuine effort to recreate the atmosphere and sensibilities of earlier decades.

Avoiding pitfalls, however, even if they are all too commonplace at the present moment, is not the end all and be all of art. It is not entirely clear why the film was made.

Kalin told an interviewer for the *Boston Globe*, "I'm fascinated by the idea of two people who become halves of a whole and commit a crime together. What is it about the particular chemistry between them that leads to murder? What happens when the balance of power and love becomes so out of whack in a relationship?"

This may be so, but it doesn't explain why the director filmed this *particular* drama. After all, stories involving this kind of intimate, tragic criminality occur more often than once every 35 years—for that matter, nothing prevented the filmmakers from creating their own fictional version. Why the Baekelands?

In reply to a question about the social issues involved and "the decadence that the Baekelands were surrounded with," Kalin commented to an interviewer rather vaguely: "Many authors have written about the doomed lives of American expatriates including Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Bowles, and James. The role of class in American culture continues to define every social interaction. *Savage Grace* is both the story of this very specific family and a cautionary tale about the price of going so far from home (literally and spiritually) that you can never find your way back" (Themovie-fanatic.com).

A significant failing of the film is that it doesn't explain how "the role of class" defines the various "social interactions," or, to put it more broadly, it doesn't make nearly enough of the events, illuminating them in the light of history and the peculiarities of American society. The filmmakers perhaps mistake being "non-judgmental," refusing to moralize, which is all to the good, with *passivity* and a failure to help an audience adequately make sense of things.

Savage Grace presents a series of episodes, with some integrity and sincerity, but never offers a compelling or coherent dramatic argument. What is missing?

There's so much here in this rather terrifying story, so much that could have been explored. The filmmakers were far too timid, far too circumspect. Whether they were aware of it or not, they were giving in to the contemporary prejudice against "grand narratives." But one can't render these lives comprehensible without a theory of American society in the middle and latter parts of the twentieth century.

Brooks Baekeland's grandfather, Leo Hendrik Baekeland (1863-1944), was a Belgian-born chemist who invented Bakelite in 1907, one of the first forms of plastic. Radios, telephones and countless other devices were soon made from the stuff, which was heat-resistant and insulated. Baekeland made a great deal of money in the process.

To the authors of the book on which the film is based (*Savage Grace*, by Natalie Robins and Steven M.L. Aronson, published in 1985), Brooks Baekeland described his grandfather, who had emigrated to the US in 1899, as "an idealist, a feudal-socialist, a radical theorist, an antimaterialist millionaire" who "despised publicity, money, fashion, sensation, exploitation." Leo's son George, with whom the old man quarreled, was, by all accounts, unhappy and reactionary—a "right-wing bastard," one acquaintance succinctly put it.

Brooks quarreled with his own father, who didn't approve of him, and was cut out of George's will; he only had money and a life of relative leisure because his grandfather had provided for him. Brooks liked to cite the comment of his grandmother, "One of the uses of money is that it allows us not to live with the consequences of our mistakes." As a matter of fact, this isn't true. The consequences are simply longer and often more catastrophic in coming.

Barbara Daly came from different circumstances, in the Boston area. Her father was an accountant for a railway, who lost out in the Wall Street Crash. He committed suicide, by gassing himself with carbon monoxide while pretending to be fixing his car (so the insurance policy would be paid), as his son watched through a garage window. The son later drove his car full speed into a tree.

Barbara's mother was ambitious and obsessed with money. An acquaintance suggested that she "probably did want to exploit Barbara...this really extraordinarily beautiful and talented daughter." This same individual snottily commented, as cited in Robins and Aronson's *Savage Grace*, that Barbara and her mother were "these sort of lace-curtain-Irish type of people," who "weren't in the picture at all"—i.e., they didn't count socially in Boston. Barbara was pursued by John Jacob Astor and had an unsuccessful screen test in Hollywood.

She no doubt saw something in Brooks, out of whatever combination of love, social-climbing and emotional desperation. Barbara had a forceful, even violent personality. Not only would she unexpectedly explode at people, she was known to go outside and wail at the moon uncontrollably. All of this got worse as time wore on, and the relationship chilled.

Brooks acknowledged that his wife "was a far more brilliant and far stronger personality than I ever was or could be." Indeed, he seems to have been cold, remote, elusive, "austere and uninvolved," alternating between "snobbery and the knowledge that his grandfather despised all the affectations and trappings of society," in Kalin's words.

The son, it seems, hardly stood a chance. There was no room for him in the family. Both parents wanted the boy to be something special, "to be a genius," as a friend described it, to satisfy their own needs.

In *Savage Grace*, the book, another acquaintance reminisces: "She—they—they were really false, the Baekelands. False. False to everything. When I first saw them as glamorous, I guess I wanted to be false, but when I began to understand how Tony felt, I saw them as—terrible, both of them.... I mean, I feel they never attended to what was serious—neither one of them ever." As for the boy, "He'd be brought in on a string and shown. She just didn't leave him alone. Not for one second." Later, after his mother's death, in prison, Tony would keep saying, "I'm free, I'm free now, I'm free." Another former friend remarked, "Every afternoon this child was praised, praised, praised, but deep down he was completely left out of everything."

"They never attended to what was serious." It's possible to be too harsh to the parents as individuals. One might say that their circles in general were not attending to what was serious in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Baekeland case invites literary comparisons, it seems. Francine du Plessis Gray, a longtime writer for the *New Yorker*, told Robins and Aronson, "You know, there's only one title for the Baekeland story and it's already been used—*An American Tragedy*." Novelist William Styron, suggested that the "small little family, a couple and their lonely boy,...were sort of misplaced out of some Scott Fitzgerald novel. Barbara and Brooks seemed a bit like Daisy and Tom Buchanan [in *The Great Gatsby*] but in a different era, and somewhat fish out of water for that reason." The Baekelands were also compared to Gerald and Sara Murphy, the American expatriates on whom the characters of Dick and Nicole Diver in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* were partially based.

Henry James, Edith Wharton and Tennessee Williams are mentioned too, and Edward Albee, as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* And Greek tragedy.

The Baekelands went and stayed abroad around 1954. To escape the stifling, conformist climate in the US? Perhaps, but they were not so fortunate as the generations of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Man Ray, Langston Hughes and others. First of all, the desire to travel in society, rather than among artists, possessed Barbara, and perhaps Brooks as well. They were both terrible name-droppers.

A friend observes, "In the entry hall there was a table and on the table was a bowl and in the bowl Barbara always had scores of visiting cards which would all be left so you could see them—'Duchesse de Croy,' 'Prince de Lippe,' 'Principessa de Colonna' " (*Savage Grace*).

Brooks describes the summer of 1955 when the couple rented a villa at Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera: "That summer our neighbor was André Dubonnet—of the drink.... My playmate was Freddy Heineken—the Dutch beer baron.... Tony's playmate was Princess Yasmin Aga Khan, the daughter of Rita Hayworth and Aly Khan, and his playground was Eden Roc." Brooks met Greta Garbo, Tennessee Williams was a guest, etc., etc. The Baekelands were friends of writer James Jones (*From Here to Eternity*) and his wife, also expatriates.

For the most part, however, very little came out of the circles they traveled in. Brooks himself, reputed to be writing a novel, never published anything. Barbara painted, with the same results. Tony was crushed between them.

America does not have a monopoly on these family tragedies, which end in murder or suicide, but it certainly seems to have more than its share. Tragically, individuals like Barbara Baekeland strive ferociously for success and social status, the elements of the American Dream, and invariably discover that wealth and status come at the expense of humanity, their own humanity.

The combination of large amounts of money, often rapidly gained, pragmatic shortsightedness and social unconsciousness can have explosive and unexpected consequences. Americans who enjoy this kind of success always seem unprepared for its reality, for the different kind of life they will be obliged to lead, for the demands that will be placed on them. Many honestly believe that money will not change them.

For the working-class or lower-middle-class American, suddenly thrown into glittering society, there is also often the glaring contradiction between the nation's official egalitarian creed and their newfound lifestyle and surroundings to be overcome.

The violence of the Baekeland saga speaks as well to the growing brutality of American life by 1972. After all, the previous decade had seen numerous political assassinations and murders, along with the attempted murder of such personalities as Andy Warhol, with whom the Baekelands had had a brief encounter.

The film doesn't resonate with much or any of this, to its cost. It is too dry, too isolating, too passive. All in all, the makers of *Savage Grace* settled for far too little.



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