

Richard Linklater's *Bernie*, about life and death in East Texas

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Directed by Richard Linklater, co-written by Linklater and Skip Hollandsworth

Bernie is the latest film from American independent director Richard Linklater, responsible for *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *The Newton Boys* (1998), among others. It tells the story of an assistant funeral director, Bernie Tiede (Jack Black), who becomes the friend and confidante to Marjorie Nugent (Shirley MacLaine), the widow of a wealthy oilman, with tragic consequences. The film is based on events that took place in East Texas in the 1990s.

In my view, Linklater's films in the past decade—including *Tape*, *Waking Life*, *The School of Rock*, *Before Sunset*, *Bad News Bears* and *Me and Orson Welles*—have been less successful than those he made in the 1990s. The relatively genial director, one senses, has had a difficult time orienting and adapting himself to the harsher, more troubling conditions of the Bush and now Obama years, in which outright criminality, both home and abroad, has become the standard operating procedure in both the government and the corporate world. He is hardly the only artist to face that dilemma.

To compound Linklater's difficulties, the changed economics of the film industry, now firmly under the control of a handful of conglomerates oriented toward the production of blockbusters, have made it harder for him to obtain the financing for the sort of anti-establishment work he would like to make.

As he told an interviewer for the *Tribune Newspapers*, who noted that 20 years ago *Bernie* would have been in wider release: "Oh, 12 years ago! Ten years ago! Around the time we first had a script [for *Bernie*], years ago, I thought it would be like a small

studio film. *Dazed and Confused*, I made for a studio for only \$6 million. *Bernie*, I thought, might be like \$12 or \$15 million. But in the early 2000s, studios quit making films like this, so by the time I got around time to actually shooting, I had 22 days to do it and absolutely no interest from the industry."

Bernie is a likeable film. Its central figure is a plump, meticulous mortician whose generosity and charm apparently conquered the hearts of many in the small community of Carthage, Texas, only a short distance from the Louisiana border. The town sits on what was once one of the largest natural-gas fields in the world. Carthage experienced a boom in the 1940s and 1950s, when it was known as the gas capital of the US. It is home to a considerable number of wealthy widows.

In Linklater's version of events, Bernie Tiede (Black) endears himself to the citizens of Carthage, despite hints that he is gay, through his sympathetic treatment in particular of older women, who have just lost their husbands. Besides working at the funeral parlor, Bernie performs as a soloist in church and throws himself into local musical theater productions. He sews curtains for those that need them and helps others with their tax returns.

Bernie meets Marjorie Nugent (MacLaine) at her late husband's funeral. The richest widow in Carthage, Mrs. Nugent is thoroughly disliked. After her husband's death, she takes over as president of the bank he had come to own, and turns down loans, as one resident suggests, "for a hobby." Another local comments, "If she had held her nose any higher, she would have drowned in a rainstorm." Marjorie has managed to quarrel with nearly all her relatives, including her sister and her son.

Bernie, as is his custom, drops by the widow's house to pay his respects and see how she is getting on. When

he persists in the visits, Mrs. Nugent finally invites him inside. Ultimately, they become inseparable. They attend concerts and social events as a couple, they vacation together in various parts of the globe. Marjorie grants him power of attorney and, finally, changes her will, leaving her worldly goods to Bernie. He becomes her primary connection to the rest of the world.

Bernie pays a price for all this. Marjorie is just as hateful to him as she is to everyone else. She badgers and nags him. He has to be at her beck and call 24 hours a day. She even chews each bite of food 25 times just to annoy him. She is, as one character suggests, “demanding, condescending and conniving.”

In the end, Mrs. Nugent pushes Bernie too far, or he experiences some sort of a breakdown, and he shoots her with a rifle. He then stuffs her body in a freezer and tells her relatives and acquaintances that she is not well and unavailable for visits and phone-calls. Meanwhile, he gives the Methodists \$100,000 for a new church, hands out money to the hard-pressed and generally steps up his good works. However, suspicions are inevitably aroused, and, nine months later, Marjorie’s corpse is discovered.

Bernie is so popular—and his victim so reviled—that ambitious district attorney Danny Buck (Matthew McConaughey) grows fearful that any local jury will acquit Tiede. Numerous townspeople approach Buck and urge him to drop the charges or at least go easy on Bernie.

Buck has the trial’s venue changed to San Augustine, another small town, and paints Bernie as a thieving opportunist and elitist (who knows which wine to drink with fish and how to pronounce *Les Misérables*) in front of a rather backward jury, with resounding success.

Linklater has a good deal of fun with the circumstances of the case. Black is appealing, although sometimes too facetious, as the effervescent Bernie, happy to speak (with superglue in hand) as a guest lecturer before a group of mortuary students about the best means of preparing the deceased for public display. It is a pleasure to see Shirley MacLaine, whose career now spans nearly six decades, although she is given relatively little to do.

The film’s source lies in a January 1998 article in *Texas Monthly* by Skip Hollandsworth (“Midnight in the Garden of East Texas”), who also had a hand in

writing the screenplay. The filmmakers have endeavored to retain the colorful language and expressions of the local population. Residents, some of them actors and some townspeople, speak directly to the camera and provide their impressions of the goings-on. Linklater compares the technique to that used by Warren Beatty in *Reds*.

As lively and pointed as some of the insights are, the approach tends to disrupt the flow of the drama. Virtually the only sequence extended to the point that a moment can be fully worked out is the trial itself, which is certainly the strongest portion of the film. McConaughey, with whom Linklater worked at the beginning of his career, is very good here. One longs for some lengthier, more complicated scenes, instead of the quasi-journalistic bits and pieces too often offered up.

Moreover, Linklater’s attitude to the townspeople occasionally verges on the condescending. It is not always clear whether we are meant to laugh *with* or *at* the residents, and whatever the director’s intent, in some venues, one suspects, audiences will not resist the temptation to snicker.

The film and the director lack some of the necessary fierceness.

Carthage may be a relatively affluent town, although as of 2000 the median income for a household in the city was only \$31,822 and one in six children lived in official poverty, but something of the desperation and painfulness of contemporary American life is missing in *Bernie*. And what of Tiede himself? He must have been torn by any number of agonizing internal conflicts, which are only hinted at by Linklater’s movie. In fact, one of the film’s most moving moments occurs during the final credits—we see the real Tiede, behind bars, in an encounter with Jack Black, who, for once, is not smirking.

Nevertheless, it is pleasing to see Richard Linklater returning to intriguing subject matter rooted in “in the actual business of human life,” as a novelist once put it. We hope he continues and deepens his efforts.



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