

Dustin Hoffman's *Quartet*: Aging and the artist

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1 February 2013

Directed by Dustin Hoffman; screenplay by Ronald Harwood, based on his play

“Old age is not for sissies,” observes a character in *Quartet*, Dustin Hoffman’s directorial debut. With a screenplay by Ronald Harwood, author of scripts that range from the admirable *The Pianist* (2002) to the lamentable *Australia* (2008), the movie is an amiable but flawed comedy-drama about a group of retired opera stars, singers and musicians housed in the elegant Beecham House in the middle of Britain’s pastoral countryside.

Without much substance to the storyline, the movie largely rests on a beautiful soundtrack, the labor of real-life musicians who practice their craft on screen. The soundtrack forms the refined scaffolding for the accomplished performances of the film’s four lead characters.

Reggie Paget (Tom Courtenay), a former top-flight opera singer, is living out his golden years in comfort and cultural bliss, together with his operatic colleagues, Wilf Bond (Billy Connolly) and Cissy Robson (Pauline Collins). He contentedly explains that he has “made the transition from opera singer to old fart with aplomb.”

Reggie gives weekly lectures to young people who descend on Beecham House by bus. Even the rappers and hip hop lovers among them listen with (all-too) studious attention as the elderly artist explains that opera was once a genre for the masses until “rich people” took it over.

Life is floating along from one serene moment to the next for the trio at Beecham House until the arrival of the former opera diva Jean Horton (Maggie Smith), who was once married to Reggie ... and broke his heart.

After a crisis too brief to be plausible, Reggie and Jean resolve their decades-old conflict. As soon, however, as Jean appears to have curbed her prima donna-like tendencies, she sets off another storm when she balks at performing the Act 3 quartet (“Bella Figlia dell’amore”)

from Verdi’s *Rigoletto* for Beecham House’s annual fund-raising gala. A recording of the piece featuring legendary performances by Jean, Reggie, Wilf and Cissy has recently been re-released.

Again the problem is swiftly overcome, and the film rousingly ends with a predictable turn of events. *Quartet* is a relatively cheerful and benign protest against the fate of artists who reach great heights in their careers and are then sent out to pasture. It is a lightweight comedy about a troubling topic. The movie’s geniality may be in part an effort to avoid financial failure, as serious films about the aged are considered box office poison.

Hoffman’s work would be harder to swallow if it weren’t for the comic talents of Michael Gambon (one minute, “I have a brilliant idea,” the next, “Oh, I’ve forgotten it!”) and especially those of veteran Scottish comedian/actor Billy Connolly (“I saw you in *Carmen*. I’ll never forget it ... but I’ll try.”). Then there is the facetious reminder to all complainants about the aging process that “the only alternative is to be the guest of honor at the crematorium.” *Quartet*’s strongest moments are the informal scenes involving the musicians and singers, who take great delight in making music at every opportunity and location, including the garden gazebo. Small biographies are offered of these artists as the film’s credits roll, among them soprano Dame Gwyneth Jones.

Hoffman succeeds in demonstrating that his theme, the psychological issues that can plague performers when their physical abilities begin to fade, is a valid one. In the movie’s production notes, the actor/director—nearing 75—explains: “As your body gets older, you become more vulnerable, but I’ve always believed that your soul can expand.”

The notes go on to explain that “Hoffman describes *Quartet* as being about people in the ‘third act’ who still have so much to give ... Connolly summarises the film’s message: ‘Don’t die until you die. Stay interested until

the very last second. I'd like to think I'll be like that. Stay interested; stay in it. Don't let them feed you; feed yourself. And don't pee your trousers.'” *Quartet* does touch upon the immense vitality and depth of knowledge and experience possessed by those who no longer stand before the footlights or cameras. The movie’s grand finale succeeds in conveying the element of tragedy within this largely unnecessary state of affairs.

It is noteworthy that there have been a number of recent films on the topic of aging. The well-received *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) is about a group of British retirees who take up residence in what they believe to be a newly restored hotel in India, while Michael Haneke’s *Amour* (2012) concerns itself, darkly, with octogenarian music teachers. There is as well the remarkable 2007 documentary *Young@Heart*, about a world-traveling singing group organized out of a Massachusetts nursing home. And the upcoming *Unfinished Song* stars Terence Stamp as a grumpy pensioner and Vanessa Redgrave as his wife.

When one looks at the credits of these movies, it becomes clear that a generation of artists who came to prominence in the 1960s has reached a critical point that is both biological and socio-cultural. The former is an immutable fact of life, which the elderly artist, like every other human being who reaches a certain age, deals with in as rational and objective fashion as he or she can. In regard to the latter, the socio-cultural element, a number of points stand out.

First, the members of this generation of actors, at least those still performing, remain physically and mentally fit. One could contrast this situation, for example, with Hollywood stars of the 1930s and 1940s: Humphrey Bogart (dead at 57), Clark Gable (at 59), Gary Cooper (at 60). Cary Grant lived to the age of 82, but retired from filmmaking two decades earlier. Also essentially quitting the movies many years before he died, at 86, was James Cagney. James Stewart, something of an exception, continued to have fairly substantial roles (at least quantitatively) until he was 70. Female performers, although they tended to live longer, had even shorter careers on the whole, unless they submitted to grotesquerie (Joan Crawford, Bette Davis).

The generation represented by Hoffman, Courtenay, Smith, Gambon, Stamp, Redgrave, Judi Dench, Anthony Hopkins, Jack Nicholson, Julie Christie, Jane Fonda, Morgan Freeman, James Fox, the even older Robert Duvall and many others rightfully refuses to be thrown on the scrap heap. These performers, to their credit, are

bucking an artificially youth-obsessed culture that does not generally appreciate or value aging artists.

By and large, this is a group who at the outset of their careers—or the more serious phase of their careers—were attracted to film and theater that was more artistically innovative and even socially hard-hitting. Hoffman, for example, is identified in particular with *The Graduate* (1967) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), Courtenay with *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963), Smith with *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969), Redgrave with *Morgan!* (1966) and *Blow-Up* (1966), Nicholson with *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* (both 1970), Christie with *Billy Liar* and *Darling* (1965), Stamp with *Billy Budd* (1962) and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967), Fox with *The Servant* (1963) and *King Rat* (1965) and Fonda with *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969) and *Klute* (1971).

Directly or indirectly, these films were associated with a politically volatile period and, in a number of cases, operated as the artistic wing or expression of broader social movements, against poverty and war, for civil rights and so forth.

In the ensuing half-century, what have these performers seen and what do they make of it? They have witnessed great technological developments and possibilities, but also a cultural regression resulting for the most part in a decline of work and opportunity. Almost without exception, they made their most enduring mark in the 1960s and 1970s. *Quartet* does not do justice to the disappointments, confusion and distress, along with other, more pleasurable sentiments, that Hoffman and his aging artistic peers must actually feel. It speaks to them several times removed, as it were, and in a rather formulaic framework. This may help give both the comic and elegiac moments their slightly forced quality. The film is not really confronting, in other words, what it half-wants and half-knows it ought to be confronting.



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