

Alexander Payne's *Nebraska*: How a great many people live today

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Directed by Alexander Payne; written by Bob Nelson

American filmmaker Alexander Payne's new work *Nebraska*, which follows an elderly man in pursuit of an illusory prize, manages to take a sharp-eyed look at how a great many people in the US live at present.

The comedy-drama, shot in striking black-and-white, centers on Woody Grant (Bruce Dern) of Billings, Montana, who is determined to get to Lincoln, Nebraska, a distance of some 850 miles, to claim one million dollars in a sweepstakes prize.

Family members cannot convince Woody, a former mechanic and long-time alcoholic, that the supposed prize is nothing but a marketing ploy. Wife Kate (June Squibb) and son Ross (Bob Odenkirk) conclude that Woody is losing his mind and would put him in a nursing home if they had the financial means. (Kate: "I didn't know that the son of a bitch wanted to be a millionaire. [To Woody] You should have thought about that ages ago and worked for it.")

It's not that the Grants couldn't use some sort of miracle. Woody and Kate live in a cramped, rundown house in a dying neighborhood. Ross is a replacement anchorman for a small-town television station and the youngest Grant, David (Will Forte), having recently been dumped by his girlfriend, is going through the motions of selling retail electronics.

Unable to dissuade the ailing Woody, who feels he is "running out of time," from attempting to walk from Billings to Lincoln, David agrees to drive Woody, who "just needs something to live for," to the mail-order sweepstakes office. He hopes the journey will help his relationship with the irascible elderly man. Along the way, the few stops they make include Mount Rushmore (Woody: "Washington is the only one with clothes ... Lincoln doesn't even have an ear."), a town where Woody loses his false teeth along some railroad tracks

after a few beers, and a hospital after the older Grant becomes ill. There a doctor tells Woody pointedly that a million dollar bonanza would "just about pay for a day in the hospital."

Another layover takes place over the course of a weekend in Hawthorne, Nebraska, where Woody grew up. Several of his brothers still remain in the town. Kate and Ross come in from Billings for the impromptu reunion, which takes place at the home of Woody's brother Ray (Rance Howard—father of Ron Howard), sister-in-law Martha (Mary Louise Wilson) and their delinquent sons Bart (Tim Driscoll) and Cole (Devin Ratray). The focal point of the rambling house is the overstuffed living room sofa that faces a huge television set. Much time is spent in front of the television, because, as Martha complains, "this economy has just torn up Hawthorne."

In the decaying town, David learns something about why a depressed Woody blankly answers most questions with "I can't remember," "I don't know," "It doesn't matter." According to an early flame (movingly played by Angela McEwan), his heavy drinking began after returning from a tour of duty in the Korean War.

Hawthorne has taverns too, in one of which Woody runs into old friends like Ed Pegram (Stacy Keach), his former partner in an auto-repair shop. Unable to resist boasting about his sweepstakes win, despite David's protestations, Woody soon finds himself the center of attention, both from well-wishers and those who feel they deserve a portion of the spoils. In the end, Woody receives something more precious than a pot of money.

Payne, born in Omaha, Nebraska to a Greek-American immigrant family, has a history of making films, such as *Election* (1999) and *About Schmidt* (2002), that demonstrate a certain acuity about social

and psychological life in “Middle America.” It is hard to believe, in the case of the new film, that “Woody Grant” is not intended to remind us of Grant Wood (1891-1942), the regionalist painter who specialized in depictions of the rural Midwest, most famously in *American Gothic* (1930), the unflattering portrait of an elderly farmer with pitchfork in hand standing beside his unmarried daughter.

Payne’s *Nebraska* exhibits a genuine (and unusual) interest in real people and real places. It concerns itself with the bleak lives of decent people without prospects, who fill in the gaps with fantasies about striking it rich, stubbornly clinging to a belief in what remains of the tattered American Dream. Everyone in the film is waiting in quiet desperation for some external force or process to change his or her life.

Phedon Papamichael’s beautiful black and white cinematography starkly captures the decomposing social fabric of vast stretches of the American Midwest, conveying a Depression-era feel reminiscent of iconic photographs of that period. A sense of economic and cultural decline pervades *Nebraska*. It is worth noting that the vast majority of critics, both those who approve and those who disapprove of the film, make no comment about this aspect of the work. The miserable and ever-deteriorating conditions of life for millions and millions of Americans are taken almost entirely for granted and arouse no particular uneasiness within the upper-middle-class layers that pass currently for an “intelligentsia.”

Dern performs his role in a disturbing, bitter and effective semi-silence, like someone whose life has induced a sort of catatonia. We learn about the impact of decades of harsh existence on Woody’s inner (and outer) life from his wife and his former girlfriend. Forte offers up the melancholy of a man resigned for the most part, yet still retaining a semblance of hope. Squibb as Kate gives vent to her deep frustration by rants distinguished by an acerbic wit, at times very amusingly. (At one point Woody says to David: “You’d drink too much too if you were married to your mother.” One can sympathize.) In fact, there is a deliciously dark comic side to the movie.

A weakness in *Nebraska* is the presence of David’s Hawthorne cousins, so backward they lower the tone of the entire movie. In these misconceived characterizations Payne’s tendency toward

condescension and impatience with regard to quite oppressed people, who have been given little or nothing by society, comes through. Even the central situation in the film, that of an individual unsophisticated and unaware enough to believe that a piece of junk mail entitles him to a fortune, might provide the opening for some, perhaps contrary to Payne’s intentions, to dismiss Woody and many like him as “losers” who “deserve what they get.”

What accounts for the director’s occasionally derisive attitude, and not only his? First of all, Payne (born 1961) and artists of his generation have lived their adult lives for the most part in an atmosphere of social quiescence in the US, marked even to this point by the lack of a mass response to the assault on the conditions of wide layers of the population. Living largely on the surface of events, the artists mistake popular shock at the dramatic changes in their lives and the widespread sense of betrayal for submissiveness and eternal passivity. Surprises lie in store.

Furthermore, historical knowledge provides a sense of what people are capable of. During the Great Depression Omaha was the scene of bitter protests by farmers in 1932, when they blockaded roads and fought with police for three nights in a row, and again in 1933, and a lengthy, bloody strike by transit workers in 1935, which resulted in 1,800 National Guard troops being called in.

Payne tends to concentrate on individual failings, rather than on a failed society and a failed culture, or at least treats the matter inconsistently. That being said, *Nebraska* is rare in its sensitivity to the plight of a neglected and suffering population.



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