

# *The Humbling*: An actor who can no longer act

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*Directed by Barry Levinson; written by Buck Henry and Michael Zebede; based on the novel by Philip Roth*

In veteran American filmmaker Barry Levinson's *The Humbling*, based on Philip Roth's novel, we first see actor Simon Axler (Al Pacino) watching and listening to himself in a mirror in his theater dressing room. "Did you believe that?," he asks himself. "Was that real for you? ... Was it honest? ... Did that mean anything to you or anyone who ever existed in the world?"

Nothing seems real or convincing to Simon any longer about his performances. He also has difficulty in remembering his parts. He dreams of being locked out of the theater, unable to reach the stage in time for his cue. As Jaques ("All the world's a stage") in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Simon delivers these famous lines: "Last scene of all,/ That ends this strange eventful history,/ Is second childishness and mere oblivion,/ Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything," and then, apparently lost and disgusted with himself, he throws himself from the stage, landing face down in the orchestra.

After a trip to the hospital, home alone in his house in the country (somewhere in the Northeast) and having determined to end his career ("I will never go on stage again"), Axler contemplates suicide. Alarmed by his own actions, he checks himself into a mental institution. A few weeks later, he emerges in a somewhat less catastrophic frame of mind.

A young woman shows up at his door, Pegeen (Greta Gerwig), the daughter of old friends of Simon's. She has been a lesbian for 16 years, but confesses to a life-long crush on the well-known actor. They fumble into a kind of love affair. (When his psychiatrist, via Skype, some time later asks Simon whether he has slept with Pegeen, he answers a bit tentatively, "I think so.")

Various actors in Pegeen's life, including two ex-lovers and her angry parents (Dianne Wiest and Dan Hedaya), as well as a former fellow patient of Simon's at the mental

hospital, who wants the actor to kill her allegedly child-molesting husband, break in on the couple's attempts at a quasi-stable relationship. As Axler tells his doctor, "I don't know what's worse. When I was here alone in my house I was so desperate, you know, and now I have these lunatics showing up at my front door."

Pegeen's dissatisfaction with his inertia, his "wallowing in angst and self-pity," in her words, pushes Simon back to the stage, in the title role in *King Lear* no less. And he seems to regain some appetite for acting. However, simultaneously, Axler is having an increasingly difficult time separating fantasy from reality. He imagines, for example, that Pegeen wants to have his child. Things don't end well, but before that, Simon gets to deliver such beautiful lines as these, from *Lear*: "We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage./ When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down/ And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,/ And pray, and sing, and tell old tales ..."

The Roth novel, or novella more properly, published in 2009, is not one of the writer's more important works, although it holds one's interest throughout. Presumably, the predicament of an artist whose powers have inexplicably disappeared into thin air ("He'd lost his magic. The impulse was spent") held some special significance for a novelist then in his 76th year. *The Humbling*, if Roth keeps his word, was his second-to-last work.

The book chronicles, in a phrase Roth uses early on in the novel, "one more of the many millions of stories of unhappily entwined men and women." No one is to blame for the situation. Axler is self-centered and aging, Pegeen perhaps somewhat reckless and light-minded in her attempt to sexually orient herself. The work though ends on this rather self-pitying note: "A man's way is laid with a multitude of traps, and Pegeen had been the last. He'd stepped hungrily into it and taken the bait like the most craven captive on earth. There was no other way for it to

wind up, and yet he was the last to find out. Improbable? No, predictable.”

The novel’s lack of urgency and concreteness and its lack of strong location in contemporary America are bound up, in my view, with the serious limitations of Roth’s outlook, shaped by postwar American liberalism and anti-communism, but that is the subject for another discussion.

In any event, Levinson and Pacino decided to take another route, a more darkly comical one, and that seems on the whole to have been the right decision. They changed a great deal, retaining only the general skeleton of the novella. In a number of ways, the film is superior to the book. Perhaps the filmmakers intuitively grasped that taking at face value Roth’s somewhat self-absorbed and self-serious account of a once famous actor fading out might have struck audiences as inappropriate and even trivial at a time of so much social trauma and mass suffering. If so, their instincts were correct.

Instead Levinson’s version of *The Humbling* is quite an informal, dreamlike, charming work. Pacino, who under the wrong conditions can chew up the scenery with the most irritating of them, is modest, restrained and thoroughly appealing and believable here. His Axler is older, frailer, more bewildered, less arrogant than the novel’s. His fragments of Shakespeare are wonderful, leaving one hungry for more. Gerwig ( *Greenberg*, *Frances Ha* ) is an intriguing, straightforward and confident presence, and Simon’s infatuation for her is perfectly understandable. The pair have a chemistry based on something intense yet thoughtful.

Not too much happens, but it happens interestingly. Simon and Pegeen come together out of mutual perplexity, and discover, as people often do, that they can help and love one another. The coming apart of things seems inevitable too. Pegeen has an eye for women still. Axler may be losing his marbles. The evolution of the relationship, its deepening, seems only to speed its doom. When they begin to mean more to each other, the undeveloped, tenuous connection between them is unable to stand the strain.

The reduction of the film’s initial budget—due to Levinson’s apparently principled decision to reject the strings attached to the originally proposed money—to a reported (by Hollywood standards) miniscule one or two million dollars, probably created better artistic conditions. The crew had to take breaks in filming, to work around Pacino’s schedule, on one occasion for as long as a month. The film was shot in Levinson’s house, much of it

with a handheld camera. The limited money supply obliged the filmmakers to be relatively creative in the décor, look and feel of the work.

Levinson, born in 1942, has a highly uneven body of work. He began in television in the 1970s, including writing for the Carol Burnett show. He also worked as a writer with Mel Brooks for several years, co-scripting and also appearing in Brooks’ *High Anxiety* (1977). Levinson directed the first of his “Baltimore films,” *Diner*, set in his hometown, in 1982. The others situated in that city are *Tin Men* (1987), *Avalon* (1990), and *Liberty Heights* (1999). These are among his most popular movies, and they are often amusing, but suffer, in my view, from softness and nostalgia. His more pointed works include *Rain Man* (1988), *Wag the Dog* (1997) and, to a certain extent, *Bandits* (2001). He also directed some extremely weak, insipid films.

Levinson is obviously literate and intelligent, and has a certain political awareness. In 2007, in the Bush years, he told an interviewer: “It’s an astounding tragedy that we are in the midst of, in America. To me, it’s almost as though the country is involved in a coup, but we don’t quite perceive it that way yet.”

He told another interviewer: “It gets harder and harder to make movies about human beings. These movies are like an endangered species. Everything is ‘simplify, simplify’ now. How many movies have sub-plots anymore?”

Asked about the hurdles involved in making and distributing *The Humbling*, Levinson told *The Dissolve*: “But some of the money people today don’t really care about the product. It could be shoes, it doesn’t matter. So you have to go into it understanding that.”

This is not earthshaking material, the relationship between Axler and Pegeen, but it is honest, amusing and sympathetic. The film is worth tracking down.



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