

# *Time Out of Mind*: Richard Gere as a homeless man in New York City

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5 October 2015

Director Oren Moverman's *Time Out of Mind*, with Richard Gere, is a sincere yet flawed film that attempts to portray the struggles of a homeless character named George Hammond.

Moverman's previous efforts include directing the Iraq war drama *The Messenger* (his debut as a director) and writing or co-writing *I'm Not There* (the Todd Haynes film about Bob Dylan) and the Brian Wilson biopic *Love and Mercy*.

In the opening scene of *Time Out of Mind* we discover a disheveled George Hammond (Gere) sleeping in a bathtub in an abandoned apartment. He is roused by an officious building manager ably played by Steve Buscemi. The building manager insists on removing George as quickly and efficiently as possible, and despite protestations from our protagonist he succeeds in doing so.

After being forced out of the building, George wanders aimlessly throughout the city. He is accompanied by the sights and particularly the sounds of New York, which serve as the film's soundtrack. Moverman and cinematographer Bobby Bukowski chose to shoot *Time Out of Mind* in what might be considered a neo-realist style, with hand-held and hidden cameras. We hear off-screen conversations from passersby and there are several long-distance shots of George.

One would assume that this is an attempt to depict the isolation that George and so many homeless individuals must feel, but, unfortunately, in this case it comes across as contrived, and in the end creates an unnecessary distance between George and the viewer. One feels Moverman missed an opportunity or perhaps was reluctant to delve more profoundly into the depths of George's plight.

As the very loose narrative unfolds, we learn that

George has lost his job, that his ex-wife is dying from cancer and that he is estranged from his daughter, Maggie (Jena Malone). Along the way he befriends a gregarious African American man by the name of Dixon (Ben Vereen) in a homeless shelter. They soon become an "odd couple" in a rather clichéd fashion. That being said, Dixon, played competently by Vereen, comes across as the more true to life of the two homeless men. He is a former jazz musician who, despite his predicament, is consistent in his liveliness and ability to find humor and hope.

Some of the more authentic moments in the film come in the form of George's difficulties with government bureaucracies and homeless shelter officials who insist on seeing some sort of identification. One empathizes strongly with George's frustrations in these circumstances as he desperately tries to remember his social security number, home address, date of birth and other pieces of information, under constant passive-aggressive interrogation from detached bureaucratic mouthpieces. Moverman attempts to balance this with a scene involving a friendlier homeless shelter attendant who pointedly tells George: "I was once in the position you are now."

George attempts to reconnect with his daughter Maggie on a couple of occasions. First at a laundromat, then in the bar where she works. Again, these moments, although well-intentioned, seem contrived and quite "Hollywoodish" in both their writing and acting. Predictably, Maggie is aloof and embarrassed at what her father has become. However, toward the film's conclusion, she does have second thoughts about her coldness.

The inevitably repetitive nature of life on the streets is a strong focus of the film. This approach has mixed results. George pleading for change, for example,

although quite realistic, failed in many respects as these moments seemed to lack an urgency and desperation. The little money George receives from the streets is spent on alcohol and clothes. There are vague allusions to George having a drinking problem, but for Moverman to harp on this aspect of his personality seems a bit lazy.

Gere's performance is earnest, but terribly self-conscious. He overdoes the naturalistic grunts and sighs, trying too hard throughout. Perhaps all this "special effort" is unsurprising as Gere had championed the script for many years seeking a suitable director.

Gere found his man in Moverman, who explains in an interview with *Indiewire*, "The project came with Richard. He approached me, he told me about a script that he had, an old script, and a character that he's been obsessed with. That's where the conversation started. In a way the movie came pre-cast. Otherwise, I would never, ever cast Richard Gere."

According to *philly.com*, the actor was affected by reading *Land of the Lost Souls: My Life on the Streets*, "a memoir by a homeless person called Cadillac Man. 'I loved the book because it was artless,' Gere says. 'He didn't know how to write, and, so, the writing, of course, was wonderful.' Gere met with Cadillac Man—a meeting that gave the actor the confidence to go ahead with *Time Out of Mind*. For three weeks, dressed in secondhand clothes, he roamed the streets. He'd scour Dumpsters for food, he'd stand at curbs, he disappeared in the thrum and hustle."

There's no reason to doubt Gere's genuineness or his social concern. Another major film performer, Paul Bettany, has directed a film called *Shelter*, which opens in a limited run in the US November 13, about a homeless couple in New York (with Jennifer Connelly, Bettany's wife, and Anthony Mackie)

Moverman further explained, "I didn't make this film as some homeless advocate who is in the trenches for years, or as anyone with any kind of righteousness or superiority on this issue. I'm just like anybody else, I ignore people as much as anybody else. I think we all live complicated lives and we have lots going on. We have a lot of narratives happening in our hands and strands of communication. Reality is really something that we have to block out sometimes, or we can't help but block out. I think that the movie opened our eyes,

for sure, to noticing people more and to maybe being more conscious about it, which is the only thing you can hope for. It's not a movie with a solution."

Nobody is expecting Moverman to offer a "solution" to the crisis of homelessness in a two-hour film but surely an artist can at least offer a strong and clear point of view. Instead, Moverman opts for a false objectivity, convinced, no doubt, that he is showing "life as it really is." In fact, this passivity is bound up with a certain superficiality, an unwillingness to go terribly deep into the social problem or the character's psyche.

In terms of the housing crisis, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted in numerous articles, the spiraling cost of living in New York City has forced thousands of people onto the streets. The official total of those living in shelters is over 60,000.

During Michael Bloomberg's tenure (2002-2013) as mayor of New York, the homeless population is estimated to have increased somewhere between 60 and 70 percent. After his successor Bill de Blasio's first year in City Hall, the total number of people sleeping in homeless shelters was 58,469. The number of people currently sleeping on the street on any given night is in the range of 4,000.

The great difficulty in finding affordable housing is obviously a major factor. A recent report on the real estate web site StreetEasy pointed out that it is impossible for a worker in New York making the city's minimum wage, \$8.75 per hour, to find an apartment. Meanwhile, the average sale price of a Manhattan apartment is \$1.87 million. According to an article in *Forbes* magazine, there are currently 78 billionaires residing in New York City.

At one point in *Time Out of Mind*, George cries "We don't exist! We don't exist!" This is a rare and powerful moment in the film that rings true for thousands and thousands of New York residents. Such have been the devastating consequences of the profit system.



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