

Louis C.K.'s *I Love You, Daddy*: The tragic fate of a significant American film

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Written and directed by Louis C.K.

I Love You, Daddy, written and directed by American stand-up comedian, writer and actor Louis C.K., was scheduled to be released in November. The film was shot in secret in June 2017, and debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival in September. Distribution rights were purchased by The Orchard, a subsidiary of Sony Music, for \$5 million.

One week before the film's debut, C.K. became a target of the sexual misconduct campaign. On November 9, in an article that appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*, five women accused him of sexual harassment. The comic-director was accused in particular of various acts of exhibitionism between the late 1990s and 2005. The following day, C.K. released a statement indicating that "These stories are true." He has not been heard from by the public since that day.

The Orchard, of course, pulled *I Love You, Daddy* immediately. (In fact, having received advance notice, the distributor announced the film's cancellation hours *before* the *Times* article was published.) Will it ever be released? In December, C.K. reportedly bought back the distribution rights.

The stories and their acknowledgment by the comic were certainly troubling. Although various sexual issues, including relatively taboo ones, were regularly incorporated into his material, if C.K. imposed himself on the various women as is alleged, his behavior was both inappropriate and irresponsible.

We noted on the WSWs at the time, however, that no evidence suggested the comic was "a fiend deserving to be liquidated. ... There must certainly have been a way to deal with his form of behavioral disorder without ending his career as an actor and comic. Perhaps one of his producers, directors or agents might have done more, or anything, to help Louis C.K. if he or she had not been so fixated on making as much money off the comic's work as possible."

Whatever C.K.'s behavior, and no one to this point has suggested it was criminal, it is not clear why his film needs to be suppressed. There is no immediately obvious link between C.K.'s specific disorders and an inability to portray human beings and situations in an accurate and honest fashion. No one has been able to point to the film as evidence of the comic's abusiveness. *I Love You, Daddy* is not a defense of exhibitionism, sexual harassment or any other sort of improper

or offensive behavior. It is an effort, albeit only partially successful, to examine the morals and behavior of a definite social layer.

In his film, C.K. plays Glen Topher, a wealthy, divorced television writer living in a luxurious Manhattan apartment with his beautiful 17-year-old daughter, China (Chloe Grace Moretz), whom he spoils rotten. Glen has one successful series under his belt, and a new one has been given the green light. However, he has no compelling idea what he wants to write about. Moreover, Glen opportunistically replaces the actress expected to play the lead in the new show with Grace Cullen (Rose Byrne), a celebrated performer, with whom he is infatuated.

At a party held at Grace's luxurious house on Long Island, Glen and China unexpectedly meet Glen's idol, veteran film director Leslie Goodwin (John Malkovich, who does a remarkable job). The 68-year-old Goodwin has a history of dating much younger women, and has even been accused of child molestation, which disgusts China. Glen, however, considers Goodwin "the greatest director of the last 30 years or more," and chastises China for assuming that the rumors of sexual impropriety are true.

But then, to Glen's horror, Leslie and China become fast friends and begin spending time alone together! Glen's attitude changes 180 degrees. "He's an old man, and she's a kid!" Incredibly disturbed by their relationship, he doesn't know how to stop it. China will turn 18 in a couple of weeks, and he seems organically incapable of saying no to her anyway.

Glen gets conflicting advice from two women. Grace, by now his girlfriend, argues that Leslie is a cultured man and the experience will be good for China. She tells Glen, "When I was 15, I dated a man in his 50s. It was my life and I don't regret it. I wanted to be with who I wanted to be with." Glen replies, "I'm sorry, Grace, but you were raped." Grace responds angrily: "How dare you! You believe you can just wave your gavel and decide who women should be with?"

On the other side is Glen's tough-talking friend and ex-lover Maggie (Pamela Adlon). "Here's what a good dad does. He puts his daughter's welfare ahead of everything, even ahead of her loving him back. So what are you gonna do? What does your gut tell you?" Glen, tentatively: "I have to tell her never to

see Leslie again. Never.” Maggie: “Ooooooh yes! Yes, I’m so excited! She is gonna hate you so f_____ much!”

Shot on black-and-white, 35-millimeter film, *I Love You, Daddy* is an homage in part to Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979), which depicts, also in black-and-white, the relationship of a 42-year-old writer (played by Allen) and a 17-year-old woman (played by Mariel Hemingway). And the character of Goodwin, the revered director accused of sex crimes, is clearly meant to remind viewers of Allen and the real-life allegations against him, although the two men don’t resemble one another at all in terms of personality or the type of artistic work they do.

The film is superior to many contemporary works in so far as there is an attempt to give the characters genuine texture and complexity. Men and women here aren’t “predators” and “victims.” It is a healthy far cry from the strictures of repressive identity politics with its miserable middle class moralizing, which helps explain why C.K. is under attack from this milieu.

There is certainly a prescient element to *I Love You, Daddy*, almost as though the comic knew what was coming. One cannot view the movie without considering the circumstances in which it has become embedded.

In general, C.K.’s character comes across as immensely sympathetic. A good deal of concern and understanding has gone into the creation of the role. It is difficult to watch the film without thinking that a great injustice has been done. An artist with evident sensitivity has been effectively blacklisted and destroyed.

Somewhat forlornly, C.K.’s comments about his “upcoming film” can still be found on his website. He writes, for example, “The only people who have seen the movie, besides some press, have been the audiences at the Toronto Film Festival. We premiered there in September. The screenings were raucous and exciting.” He then links the positive comments of Cameron Bailey, the film festival’s program director, who observes that *I Love You, Daddy* “is pure, unfiltered Louis C.K., and shows him to be a ruthless observer of showbiz behind the scenes and human nature behind the masks.” Bailey goes on, “We don’t see this kind of movie anymore. As for the actions of the characters on display here, we’ll continue to see them so long as artists pursue their visions, and people their desires.”

C.K. also refers to a “great review” in the *New York Times* that suggested his film “was one of the best two movies in Toronto.” It is unlikely that Bailey or the *Times* will be making any more positive comments any time soon.

Since the November 9 *Times* article, C.K. has been disowned by the media-entertainment establishment. In addition to The Orchard’s cancellation of *I Love You, Daddy*, production company FX, with whom C.K. had worked for eight years, on five television series, cut all ties. Netflix canceled a planned stand-up comedy special. TBS halted production on a new animated series created by C.K. HBO cut him from an upcoming autism fundraiser and removed his work from their

streaming and “on demand” services. Remarkably, the Disney Channel scrubbed C.K.’s voice out of re-runs of its animated series *Gravity Falls*. His lines have all been re-recorded (but the character still looks just like him!)

It would be very good if C.K. could simply tell some of the film and television executives and media attack dogs to drop dead, if he could appear before the public and say, “Yes, I have real problems, but I am not going away, I am going to continue doing my work, I am going to continue my comedy and my criticism of the society and the culture.” No doubt there are many reasons why he would find it difficult to make such a statement.

The film documents the affairs of an insular, wealthy layer, and the writer-director’s attitude tends to be self-critical, although the sharpness of the self-criticism comes and goes. C.K. virtually breaks the fourth wall in one scene when, in reply to another character’s comment, Glen says that “Of course” it’s a beautiful day, because “we’re rich and we’re on a private beach.” When Glen throws China a lavish 18th birthday party—to which the latter arrives blindfolded, dressed as a princess, in a horse-drawn carriage—Maggie tells him, “None of this makes you a good dad. You know that, right? I mean, this is the kinda shit that Turkish gangsters do for their kids and they don’t even know their names.”

C.K. shows what he’s most familiar with, including the emptiness and callousness of this world. The latter qualities find particular expression in Glen’s sidekick, Ralph (Charlie Day), who eventually, seamlessly jumps ship and becomes one of Goodwin’s hangers-on when Glen has career difficulties. C.K. knows this crowd well.

At the film’s weaker moments, the privilege and luxury merely serve as a backdrop for a seemingly unrelated story about morals and taboos.

As a film, this is the greatest weakness of *I Love You Daddy*, that it is more a series of intriguing vignettes than a thoroughly worked out comedy-drama.

In the end, to the film’s credit, the sexual/moral predicament at the center of the story does not shake the world off its axis. No one bursts into flames. Everyone’s life goes on, some having matured in the process. The idea of ruining someone’s life or censoring their life’s work is never suggested. In fact, there’s a lot to laugh at.

This is all very scandalous to the puritans of #MeToo, a sign of their extreme sensitivity to criticism.



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