What do Tamara Jenkins' *Private Life* and Jesse Peretz's *Juliet, Naked* have in common?

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Private Life, *written and directed by Tamara Jenkins;* Juliet, Naked, *directed by Jesse Peretz, written by Evgenia Peretz, Jim Taylor and Tamara Jenkins*

Private Life (Tamara Jenkins) and *Juliet, Naked* (Jesse Peretz) have a number of things in common, aside from the presence of Jenkins as director of the first film and a co-writer of the second.

Each is a relatively unpretentious, low-budget, "independent" film. Each features a number of conscientious and talented performers. Each follows, with varying degrees of comedy and pathos, a group of middle class adults as they attempt to navigate certain complicated moral or emotional situations. Each hints that one or more central characters have put radical or "cutting edge" ideas and days behind them. Each has a central female character determined to have a child before "it is too late." Each film is slight.

In *Private Life*, Richard (Paul Giamatti) and Rachel (Kathryn Hahn) are a middle-aged, New York couple trying to have a child. They were once active in the avant-garde theater world—now he runs a pickle company. The pair undergo various expensive, time-consuming and occasionally humiliating medical procedures, all of which fail.

Previously, we learn, Richard and Rachel were matched with a pregnant teenager in Arkansas who apparently wanted to give up her baby but then abruptly stopped communicating with them—in some sort of an "emotional scam," as a social worker phrases it.

Richard's sister-in-law, Cynthia (Molly Shannon), his brother's second wife, complains that Richard and Rachel are pursuing "this fantasy of fertility, when it's pretty clear that it's consuming them. They are strung out. Their marriage is a wreck, they're always fighting. They're like fertility junkies! … They've been doing this for years! They need to stop."

The disappointments indeed take their toll. Their ebullient doctor (Denis O'Hare) ultimately suggests Richard and Rachel consider using an egg donor. Rachel, appalled at first, terms the procedure "science fiction." ("It's not science fiction, Rach. It's pretty primitive, actually. They do it with farm animals all the time." "Well, I'm not a goat! … I'm not putting someone else's body parts into my uterus.") However, she eventually agrees.

Auspiciously, their favorite step-niece, Sadie (Kayli Carter), Cynthia's 25-year-old daughter by another marriage and thus not a blood relative, comes to stay with them at their Lower East Side apartment.

Floundering somewhat, Sadie—a seriously aspiring writer—is completing college "in absentia." The couple broach the idea of Sadie donating her eggs, and she quickly agrees, once she understands what type of "eggs" they are talking about ("Actually, we wanted to ask you about your eggs…" "Scrambled is good, but however you guys do them is fine with me"). Not surprisingly, various complications and obstacles—including Cynthia's objections, Sadie's impulsiveness and ongoing physiological problems—arise.

The issues here are real ones. It is natural for human beings to want to have children and admirable when they persevere even in the face of great difficulties.

Jenkins has apparently loosely based her feature films on episodes from her own life: in *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998), she offered a fictionalized version of a portion of her childhood or adolescence. Jenkins was raised by a father who had little or no money and tried to make a living as a car salesman in wealthy Beverly Hills, California. *The Savages* (2007) dealt with two siblings attempting to take care of their father who is slipping into dementia.

Jenkins, married to Jim Taylor, Alexander Payne's longtime collaborator, makes no secret of the fact, according to Indiewire, that the script for *Private Life* "draws from hers and Taylor's struggles to have a child. 'I wasn't young,' she said. 'I was suddenly confronted with the world of assisted reproduction and adoption. We were looking at international adoption, we were doing IVF [in vitro fertilization] … When I emerged from my own soup and looked around at all these people who were having the same fertility dramas, there was a mini-epidemic among all the

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people I knew.’”

As far it goes, every performance rings true. Giamatti, Hahn, O’Hare, Shannon and John Carroll Lynch as Charlie, Richard’s brother, are all convincing. Kayli Carter’s outpouring of sometimes confused youthful emotion and energy, as Sadie, is genuinely captivating.

There is nothing much to object to here, but still the picture of life seems small and somewhat self-absorbed. Aside from one reference to an “idiot” friend who has told Richard and Rachel that “having a baby is an immoral act” because of “overpopulation, climate change … [and the] rise of neo-fascism,” larger events or processes hardly make an appearance. The couple, *Private Life* hints, once led more artistically or even politically provocative lives, but either the times have made that no longer possible or they have simply “grown up.”

Jenkins, like Taylor and Payne, is obviously capable and sensitive. Is there nothing she finds more pressing, perhaps more tragic and profound than the stories she has recounted so far?

Juliet, Naked

Juliet, Naked, directed by Jesse Peretz (*First Love, Last Rites, The Ex, Our Idiot Brother*) is a more disappointing work, if only because it seemed, comically at least, very promising.

Duncan (Chris O’Dowd) lives with his girlfriend Annie (Rose Byrne) in Sandcliff, a fictional English coastal town not far from London. He is obsessed with Tucker Crowe, an American singer-songwriter, allegedly one of the “unsung figures of alternative rock,” who hasn’t been heard from for 25 years. On Duncan’s rather pathetic blog, devoted to Crowe, rumors abound as to the singer’s fate. His 1993 album, *Juliet*, is considered his masterpiece.

Annie is tired of hearing about Crowe and generally bored with her life as an archivist in the small town. She is also unhappy with Duncan’s lack of interest in having a child.

Tucker (Ethan Hawke), who reads Duncan’s blog, sends the latter a CD in the mail— *Juliet, Naked*, purportedly a stripped down and more soul-baring version of the 1993 original.

When Annie anonymously writes a sharply negative review of the CD on Duncan’s blog, Crowe, amused, reads it and replies to her directly. He is currently living in a garage belonging to an ex-wife, along with one of his many children.

Crowe and Annie strike up a correspondence. Eventually, he scrapes the money together to visit England for the birth of a grandchild. He visits Annie in Sandcliff. Meanwhile, Duncan has taken up with another woman and moved out of Annie’s house. Inevitably, she introduces Duncan to his hero, who is decidedly skeptical. “And I’m f------ Stevie Wonder,” he responds.

Finally convinced that Crowe is indeed Crowe, Duncan comes to dinner and can’t help himself acting like a pedantic and single-minded “fan.” Crowe snaps that he finds his own work to be made up of “insipid, self-pitying songs.” Duncan bows out.

Phil Davis, known for his performances in several of Mike Leigh’s films, makes a brief and amusing appearance as the town’s somewhat dubious mayor who blandly introduces Crowe to a local crowd, entirely falsely, as a Grammy-award-winner and member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Crowe has his personal complications, including the gaggle of children, most of whom are legitimately angry with him. Annie has her dissatisfactions to deal with. The film at this point turns into a romantic comedy of the rather “insipid” and flat variety, providing an opportunity for Annie to “come into her own.” Like *Private Life*, *Juliet, Naked* too implies that Crowe at least once had a more unconventional and oppositional outlook and lifestyle, but he also needs to mature and accept “personal responsibility.” There is a definitely conformist thread in these two films.

It’s unfortunate because Hawke is always watchable and O’Dowd, an outstanding comic personality, is largely wasted here. The latter virtually disappears from *Juliet, Naked*. The comic possibilities in the absurd encounter between the two, idol and worshipper, are peculiarly squandered, although this is presumably the film’s guiding motif and reason for being. It is also not insignificant whether Crowe is actually gifted or not. The film is not interested enough to pursue the matter.

The extent to which Jenkins and Taylor, two of the writers of *Juliet, Naked*, have left their imprint on this adaptation of Nick Hornby’s 2009 novel is not known to me. But this film too ends up focused on the problem of a woman hovering above or below the age of 40 resolved to have a child! Surely, there are other subjects in the world!

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