

Fourth of July and the vindictive campaign against comic Louis C.K.

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30 August 2022

Directed by Louis C.K.; written by C.K. and Joe List

Fourth of July is a family comedy-drama from American comic Louis C.K. A jazz pianist and former alcoholic, Jeff (co-writer Joe List), who now lives in New York City, travels to rural Maine for an annual visit with his extended, regressive New England family. This time Jeff plans to confront his parents about what he considers to be their mistakes and even mistreatment.

The film was co-written, directed, produced and self-financed by C.K. It premiered at New York's Beacon Theatre on June 30.

C.K.'s participation alone has altered *Fourth of July's* reception by the media, and by the public too.

In November 2017 the *New York Times* published an article including allegations from five women that C.K. had acted crudely and inappropriately in their presence. He acknowledged the wrongful behavior and apologized for it.

However, the WSWS noted at the time, "Louis C.K. is not a fiend deserving to be liquidated. He appears to suffer from emotional disorders that find expression in his compulsive exhibitionism. 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."

In any event, from that point onward, thanks to the #MeToo witch-hunt, C.K. would be known as the "disgraced comedian." His projects were cancelled or shelved (including his film *I Love You, Daddy*). C.K. has attempted to resurrect his stand-up comic and film career, in the face of ongoing denunciations. On the whole, it is felt by the moral crusaders that he has shown insufficient repentance and needs to spend years more in purgatory.

Fourth of July is a generally amiable and humane, if slight work. Presumably, it draws on the backgrounds of C.K. and List, who each spent a portion of his childhood in the Boston or surrounding area.

Jeff is an insecure, neurotic individual. He tells his therapist (C.K.) in an early scene that he has now had four episodes in which he believes (falsely, of course) he has run someone over with his car. Each incident seems to involve a conversation or another type of interaction with Jeff's domineering mother. He is also convinced that he has a problem with the side of his face, despite a complete lack of medical proof.

Jeff meets up with his Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) sponsor, Bill (Bill Scheft), who urges him to mentor in turn another recently sober individual, Bobby (Robert Kelly), a drummer. In response to a stream of AA platitudes, the hard-bitten Bobby at one point complains about Jeff "speaking in bumper stickers."

Jeff: If you feel like a drink, call me.

Bobby: So we can drink together?

Jeff is not looking forward to his annual vacation. "Let's skip it," he impulsively suggests to his wife Beth (Sarah Tollemache), who is astonished by the comment. "My father hates me, my mother hates you," he goes on. It emerges that Beth is not happy they never had a child.

Eventually, in regard to the dreaded Maine trip and related matters, Jeff insists dead-pan to Beth, "I'm going alone ... I'm going to confront, kill my parents, I'll make you pregnant ... we'll die."

Arriving in Maine, Jeff is true to his word. He informs his parents, "You never showed me love." His mother (Paula Plum) hugs him off-handedly and considers the matter closed. Jeff's father (Robert Walsh), one of the most troubling presences in the film, hardly utters a word. His expression suggests the deepest melancholy and regret.

The various uncles, aunts and cousins pour forth a veritable torrent of backwardness, in regard to hated New York City, culture, jazz, sobriety, homosexuality, etc. Jeff's uncle Kevin (Nick Di Paolo) is one of the worst, endlessly digging at his nephew. The general conversation runs to derisive comments about Jeff's "getting sober, getting gay." There's "nothing decent anymore," etc.

Things build up. Eventually, Jeff lays into his assembled family, calling them a "bunch of drunks." He turns on his mother in particular, terming her a "spider" who envelops and suffocates everyone. Jeff carries on excitedly, "F--- all of you ... I hate you. I hate myself too."

The various family members are outraged at his ingratitude and lack of appreciation. His mother confronts him the following morning: "I'm a spider, you said ... You blame your father for your problems. You broke your father's heart." In one of the few references to the wider situation, she continues, "We keep the peace. It's the Fourth of July weekend. We celebrate our nation." Large American flags are in abundance.

Later, Jeff's father drifts from room to room. He offers a kind of faltering, painful monologue: "I ... think ... I feel ashamed. ... I just feel bad. ... I ... think ... I let him down. It's worse than that even ... to let someone down, in the first place ... I think I feel ashamed of myself. ... I think ... it's too late ... for anything. ... It's too late."

That phrase is later echoed by Beth, after an appointment with a doctor about having a child. She also asserts, "It's too late."

Do either of these lines have a broader, even social significance? Possibly, but the idea is never developed.

Fourth of July more or less peters out, with reconciliation and

forgiveness in the air.

There are interesting aspects here. The difficult personal situation is treated with some sincerity. The family is infuriating, but at the same time, still alive and kicking. Not a group of prima donnas anyway. They absorb Jeff's denunciations, dip their heads momentarily and persevere. Their stubbornness and quasi-stoicism, in the oldest, most tradition-laden part of the country, has its undoubtedly negative side, but not every possibility has been closed off yet. Genuine opposition, beyond Jeff's mere griping, would polarize the situation, but also might open certain eyes.

It is irritating when an adult, sometimes at the instigation of a therapist, seeks to "come to terms" with his or her childhood, which often means blaming a parent or parents for every significant difficulty in later life. Unless there has been a pattern of genuine physical or systematic psychological abuse—which doesn't seem to be true in this case—the complaints may be misplaced. Existence is not easy for anyone in this world. Better to examine the wider dimensions and more immediate sources of the unhappiness, the conditions and state of one's life.

The performers have taken the situation seriously. The film is adroitly shot and edited. C.K. demonstrates film sense.

But it is all far too small. If an American filmmaker entitles a work "Fourth of July," a historically and socially loaded phrase, one has the right to anticipate *some* sort of broader statement. What is the state of American life on this famous anniversary? Some insight? A hint even?

There is almost nothing in C.K.'s movie along these lines, apart from its arguing for the existence of patriotism, homophobia and stifled personality, on the one hand, and liberal lack of confidence and fragility, on the other. Is it a plea for an ideological cease-fire, or even an olive branch extended to the "other side"?

In his director's statement, Louis C.K. explains that he and List had "met at the same subject, family, from two different perspectives." One, according to C.K., belonged to a young man "struggling to find the confidence to start his own family and finding that he is overwhelmed by the mistakes of the family he was raised in." The other was the perspective of "a father whose kids are grown and who is beginning to confront the unfixable mistakes of his young fatherhood and the impact they might have on his children."

The comic adds that "we found the movie was also a great vehicle for talking about anxiety. Anxiety, it's something that almost everyone who I love suffers from. I have a lot of remorse in my life about having misunderstood the anxiety suffered by people I love."

This is perfectly decent, but hardly earth-shaking. Generally speaking, C.K. and List have not gone much beyond the fixation of current filmmakers with their own personal identities and immediate psychological uneasiness. And, frankly, the emotional circumstances and perturbation of the relatively comfortable middle class, largely indifferent to the suffering everywhere around them, is simply not that fascinating.

Nonetheless, the almost universally hostile response of the so-called film critics to *Fourth of July* is dishonest and cowardly. The reader will readily grasp that the film's narrowness of vision cannot be a tremendous stumbling block. The media coverage is not criticism, like ours, from the left. After all, the reviewers on a weekly basis find qualities to praise in the latest superhero or comic book "blockbuster" drivel.

C.K.'s film has a 33 percent approval rating from the critics at a popular review aggregator. Meanwhile, the militaristic *Top Gun: Maverick* has a 96 percent approval rating, *The Black*

Phone 82 percent, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* 74 percent and *Thor: Love and Thunder* 65 percent.

There is no innocent explanation for such a phenomenon. The critics either share the views of the #MeToo crowd or crawl before these reactionary forces. Reviewers who allow the most stupid and careless material to pass before their eyes with hardly a qualm have sharpened their critical tools to attack *Fourth of July*. Some pretend to be dealing with C.K.'s film objectively, as though his "disgraceful behavior" had no influence on them. Others let the cat out of the bag.

"*Fourth of July* is a trifle," comments *Variety*, "and a facile, easy-to-watch one. But what it's offering under the surface feels, in part, like a clandestine defense of Louis C.K.'s transgressions." The *Hollywood Reporter* argues that if the comic "really wanted to make an impact with his first film since the unreleased *I Love You, Daddy*, perhaps he should have delved into his own psyche instead."

The *Daily Beast* argues that *Fourth of July* allows its central character to "damn and then forgive" his family in a manner that "feels a lot like the sort of amnesty C.K. wants for himself." Furthermore, the film is "a subtle reflection of where C.K. is today, cognizant of his shortcomings and yet nonetheless desperate for others to absolve him of his sins without having to atone for them first." Amnesty? Atone?

We could go on, but why bother? The various "scathing" comments would not become any more enlightening or less absurd. Again, one has to remind oneself: this is the US media, the filthy, lying institution that accepts without question invasions, mass killings, the right of war criminals (including every US president in recent decades) to get off scot-free, but comes down like a ton of bricks on a comic who demonstrates sexual peculiarities and excesses. The process is cynical and repugnant in the extreme.



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