

The Humans: Lower middle class life as a horror story

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3 November 2022

The Humans is a 2021 film written and directed by Stephen Karam, based on his own play, first staged in 2015. A family gathers for the Thanksgiving holiday in a dilapidated New York City apartment that is a new home to the youngest daughter.

Erik and Deirdre Blake (Richard Jenkins and Jayne Houdyshell), residents of Scranton, Pennsylvania, are visiting Brigid (Beanie Feldstein), an aspiring composer, and her Asian-American boyfriend Richard (Steven Yeun). Another daughter, Aimee (Amy Schumer), who lives in Philadelphia, has come for the holiday meal. The Blakes have also brought Erik's mother (June Squibb), wheelchair-bound and in dementia.

As the drama unfolds, almost all the characters' situations prove to be challenging. Aimee has lost her girlfriend and her job at a law firm, and suffers from a condition requiring surgery. Brigid is struggling financially in an expensive city. Deirdre has toiled 40 years in an office, but she now works for "two guys in their 20s" who make "five times" what she does. Late in the film, we learn that Erik too has lost his job, as a janitor at a Catholic school, because of an affair with a teacher. He has no pension, no savings. A beloved lake house has had to be sold because of the parents' financial woes. Things are only getting worse. "Don't you think it should cost less to be alive?," someone pointedly asks. As for rich people, "God knows where their money comes from."

Erik has a recurring nightmare about a faceless woman. He and Aimee barely escaped being caught in the 9/11 attacks. Deirdre has a tense, problematic relationship with Brigid. Both daughters tend to sneer at their mother, her oddball religious beliefs and her eating habits behind her back. The grandmother is virtually vegetative, except for a painful, angry

outburst. We do get to see something of her former thoughtful, sensitive self through the reading out loud of an email she sent her granddaughters ("Look out for each other") on the eve of her descent into senility.

The nearly unfurnished apartment, in Lower Manhattan's Chinatown, plays an active role in the film, as a threatening, almost malevolent presence. Paint bubbles ominously on the walls, the electricity fails from time to time, rusty pipes rattle and hiss, the windows on an interior courtyard are smeared and filthy, sudden, inexplicable noises come from neighboring apartments, cell phones barely function. With its ominous atmosphere, *The Humans* has many elements or motifs consciously borrowed from the horror genre.

All in all, the picture of the Blakes is not a pretty or happy one. Various tributes to "family" and how that "is what matters" largely ring hollow, especially as solidarity among the family members seems tenuous.

Sadness, loneliness, declining economic prospects ... Deirdre expresses a dislike for gory movies: "There's enough going on in the real world." The film ends with the characters in almost complete darkness. The American family drama has reached a point of considerable bleakness, having traveled some distance (along with the society it reflects) from a play and film such as Frank Gilroy's *The Subject Was Roses* (first staged in 1964, filmed in 1968).

Karam's father is Lebanese American. He was raised in Scranton, he told an interviewer, "in a Maronite Christian household—Maronite is the Lebanese version of Roman Catholicism." He has written a number of plays, including *columbinus* (inspired by the Columbine High School mass shooting), *Speech & Debate* and *Sons of the Prophet* (about a Lebanese-American family).

Karam reveals a sensitivity to the “downward mobility” of wide layers of the US population. He would have seen some of that growing up in Scranton, a beat-up industrial city whose population fell by half between 1930 and 2010.

In an interview, he referred to worries about “poverty, sickness, losing the love of someone” as “existential human fears” and indicated that his theme in part was the “dying middle class.” He went on, “As a playwright, you can’t write about what it means to be alive and not be political. And if you’re writing about what it means to be alive today, you’re going to end up writing a political play.”

Karam spoke to the *New Yorker* specifically about the problem of having an aging parent: “In a place like New York, where the rich are very rich, it’s easy to forget that for most people it’s not a viable financial option to put your parents into assisted-living facilities for a long period of time. These financial stresses are terrifying, as if watching your parents’ health fade year after year wasn’t scary enough. I think that can take a serious toll. Also, people are working harder longer. I have relatives who have worked at the same place for over forty years and are still not retired.”

These are all legitimate and even praiseworthy concerns. An obvious intelligence is at work here. The actors all do top-notch work. This is no surprise in the cases of Jenkins, Houdyshell and Yeun (*Minari*), but Schumer continues to exceed expectations as a serious actress.

However, one has to point out that Karam expresses a degree of shock (and even amazement) over physical circumstances of life that have bedeviled millions of New York (and other urban) working-class residents for decades and more. What’s new is that these miserable conditions are extending themselves ever upward and outward, dragging in a greater and greater proportion of the population. A handful of human beings live like pharaohs, with “golden toilets,” in Karam’s own phrase, while broad layers sink into social deprivation.

The writer-director has obvious skills as a writer of dialogue, some of it amusing. Certain moments have the ring of truth. Other elements are more jarring. Jenkins’ Erik, for example, who spends a great deal of time gazing disconsolately out windows or staring into space, has more the demeanor of a stoical, introverted

college professor than a high school maintenance man.

Beyond that, Karam half-jokingly terms *The Humans* a “family thriller,” but it is far from clear how the lurid-Gothic aspects contribute to the drama, if they do at all. How does making the work resemble a horror movie add anything to our understanding of the Blakes and their relationships, to each other and to the world? It might be one of those overly clever conceptions that should have been set aside.

The apartment is so menacing it is not clear why anyone, even on a limited income, would rent it. The self-conscious emphasis on the disturbing character of the space distracts the viewer from the painful social realities. It also may serve to distract him or her from the fact that the drama is not all that well or at least evenly developed, that the characters at times are a bit thin, even predictable. The net result, oddly enough, of the “horror” dimension is the weakening of the social commentary.

A sensible review in *Reverse Shot* observes that the “camerawork [in *The Humans*] is at times over-deliberate, too intent on aestheticizing the cramped quarters when a more straightforward approach might have benefited the narrative.” Not only the camerawork. A more straightforward approach in general would have strengthened the narrative.

In any event, Karam demonstrates sincerity and compassion in *The Humans*. We shall see where he goes from here.



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