

The Holdovers: Alexander Payne on safe, familiar ground ...

and the venomous attack on Roman Polanski's *The Palace*

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US director Alexander Payne's *The Holdovers* (scripted by David Hemingson) is set during the winter break in 1970 at fictional Barton, a posh New England boarding school. At the center of the narrative is cranky Paul Hunham (Paul Giamatti), an exacting classics teacher. Years before, Hunham attended the school on scholarship, something he doesn't forget as an element of his resentment toward his often privileged students.

The Holdovers, an amiable and perfectly generous, but not greatly challenging effort, has received more than 180 nominations globally for film awards, and has won more than 100 awards. Most recently, it was nominated in five categories at this year's Academy Awards (best picture, actor, supporting actress, original screenplay and film editing).

As the film opens, Hunham is grading papers, mostly with Ds and Fs, and complaining to himself (and later to others) about his students being "philistines," "hormonal vulgarians," "troglodytes" and "snarling Visigoths." In turn, he is generally despised by his charges who call him "Walleye," due to a false eye, and other nicknames pertaining to allegedly congenital body odor.

In his life's work, Hunham has chosen to sacrifice popularity as part of his pedagogical mission (... "always found myself drawn to the ascetic. Like a monk. The forgoing of sensual pleasure for the achievement of spiritual goals").

The isolated, unpopular Hunham has a penchant for Marcus Aurelius and whiskey, not necessarily in that order. He hands out odious punishments to errant boys, all the while telling them: "Consider yourselves lucky. During the third Punic campaign, 149-146 B.C., the Romans laid siege to Carthage for three entire years. By the time it ended, the Carthaginians were reduced to eating sand and drinking their own urine. Hence the term punitive."

In one early scene, Barton's cognac-sipping headmaster, Hardy Woodrip (Andrew Garman) berates Paul for costing the academy an important donor by giving a "legacy student" a failing grade. Hunham reminds the headmaster that the school used to live by the notion that it could not sacrifice its "integrity on the altar of their [the affluent families'] entitlement."

When a colleague backs out, Paul is tasked with supervising the "holdovers," presumably those adolescents whose rich, neglectful families care the least about them, left on campus at the holidays. Troublesome student Angus Tully (Dominic Sessa), whose mother has canceled a family trip to honeymoon with her new husband, is one of the unlucky bunch.

Also staying behind at Barton over Christmas is the likable African American cafeteria supervisor Mary Lamb (Da'vine Joy Randolph), whose son Curtis, a former star student at Barton on scholarship, has been killed in Vietnam. He only enlisted in the military to obtain a college education. This is a heartbroken Mary's first Christmas without her son. Paul is sensitive to her grief and the two toast to Mary's jibes such as "rich and dumb ... [a] popular combination around here." When the need arises to defend Curtis, Paul snarls: "How many boys do you know who have had their hands blown off? Barton boys don't go to Vietnam. They go to Yale or Dartmouth or Cornell, whether they deserve to or not."

One father, a Pratt & Whitney executive, swoops in by helicopter to fly those boys able to obtain parental permission off to a ski resort. Angus is left with Mary and Paul, becoming part of an ostracized, marginalized trio.

Predictably, Paul and Angus end up establishing a strong emotional connection, with Mary playing the role of a tough, endearing arbitrator.

The Holdovers is a pleasant, digestible film and the three leads are appealing. It is well made, as are all Payne's films, characterized by elegant cinematography and conscientious design and production. However, it is not a genuine advance for the director. The comedy-drama's general trajectory and ultimately heartwarming denouement are set out for all to see virtually from its opening sequence. Inevitably, a work that lives up to expectations to this degree is not capable of offering a strong comment on life or society. It is too much *with* and *part of* the world as it is.

As compared to Payne's angrier, more hard-hitting works, *The Holdovers* is relatively "safe" and conventional.

Different impulses are clearly at work in Payne's filmmaking, as they are in the work of some of his directing

contemporaries, such as Ethan and Joel Coen, David O. Russell, Todd Haynes, David Fincher and Steven Soderbergh. Stretches of cynicism and misanthropy alternate in their work with sequences or more of genuine insight and feeling. The official ideological reaction of the 1980s and 1990s disconcerted and disoriented these individuals, rendering them, at best, “neutral” or non-committal for the most part in relation to society as a whole. They are largely unaware at present that wide layers of the population have been radicalized. They remain far behind that development.

Payne has shown himself capable of throwing well-deserved punches. *Election* (1999), for example, a lampooning of the American political landscape, is to date a high point. The film’s central character, Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon), a conniving, ambitious and utterly devoid-of-principles high school girl running for student government president, represents the movie’s sharpest edge and spoke to something about the debased political and cultural situation in America. Payne has yet to create another character that so captures a particular social type and era, although he comes close in *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Nebraska* (2013). *Downsizing* (2017) too has its moments.

It would help if Payne were more aware of the pressures pushing him to soften or weaken his work.

Roman Polanski’s *The Palace*

The Palace is a dark satire directed by Roman Polanski, cowritten by Polanski, Jerzy Skolimowski and Ewa Piaskowska. It has been excluded from North American distribution by the current neo-McCarthyite blacklisting of Polanski.

The setting is Gstaad, Switzerland. It’s New Year’s Eve 1999 and the Palace Hotel staff is taking orders from manager Hansueli (Oliver Masucci), who awaits a collection of demanding guests.

Among the bizarre luminaries who will arrive are world-renowned plastic surgeon Dr. Lima (Joaquim de Almeida), a retired porn star called Bongo (Luca Barbareschi), Mr Crush (Mickey Rourke), Texas oligarch Arthur William Dallas III (John Cleese) and his decades-younger wife Magnolia (Bronwyn James). Fanny Ardant plays The Marquise who feeds her precious little pooch the best caviar with unfortunate results.

With cinematography by DP Pawel Edelman and a lively score by Alexandre Desplat, the story unfolds in the elite, Gothic Swiss ski resort. On the eve of the year 2000, slaving over the guests are a collection of abused waiters, porters, and cooks.

In a statement, Polanski said: “For almost half a century I

have been visiting the Gstaad Palace in Switzerland, host to an extremely rich and polyglot elite, served by the proletariat of the hotel staff. These two worlds are, each in their own way, hilarious, at times even grotesque. A gulf separates them, commencing with their political views. The only thing that unites them is the figure of the hotel manager, who takes care of everyone and tries to satisfy them all, a task that in truth means he sometimes has to suck up to both guests and staff. He uses his diplomatic skills to find a way out of the most improbable situations.

“The idea of making a film about this exotic world came to me at once. It had to be a comedy, a rather brusque and sarcastic one, stern in its attitude toward the characters of the film, but not without a hint of indulgence and affection.”

The film, cowritten by Skolimowski, Polanski’s collaborator on his first feature-length film, *Knife in the Water* (1962), is certainly far from Polanski’s best. The humor is often labored, and the overall satire lacks sharpness. But it is certainly not inferior to most of the pointless, bombastic rubbish churned out by Hollywood on a weekly basis, generally celebrated or at least taken seriously by the American media.

In other words, the ferocious critical attacks on *The Palace* are out of proportion to its weaknesses.

A small sampling of the universal onslaught: from the *Standard* in the UK—“Polanski’s name as a filmmaker is in the toilet, along with the humour”; *Hollywood Reporter*—“Roman Polanski’s Dreadful Class Satire Attempts to Eat the Rich”; *Guardian* in the UK—“Roman Polanski’s tacky hotel farce is the worst party in town”; *Variety*—“Roman Polanski’s New Year’s Eve Hotel Comedy About a Bunch of Wealthy Idiots Is a Laughless Debacle”; *Deadline*—“Roman Polanski’s Dreadful Hotel Comedy Makes The Controversial Director A Laughing Stock.”

This politically motivated and dishonest venom is a continuation of Polanski’s persecution at the hands of #MeToo fanatics, or those who are intimidated by the latter.



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