Sarah Friedland's *Familiar Touch*: A character study of a woman with dementia

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The central character in Sarah Friedland's *Familiar Touch* is Ruth, a dignified and well-educated woman in her 80s. Faced with advancing dementia, she must navigate strange new surroundings as she moves from her comfortable and beloved home into the memory care unit of an assisted living retirement community. The subject is treated in a humane and thoughtful fashion.

Ruth is sensitively portrayed by Kathleen Chalfant. The central contradiction in her personality is brought out immediately. Ruth is not the stereotypical image of someone with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. She is well-groomed and her home is apparently well taken care of. And yet, within a few minutes, we become aware of the fact that she does not recognize her son, Steve (H. Jon Benjamin). Her short-term memory is almost gone. When her son arrives to drive her to her new home, she asks him about his profession, and begins to flirt with him.

The main body of the film consists of separate scenes that illustrate Ruth's gradual adjustment to her new surroundings. At first she thinks it is some kind of hotel, although her son explains that she has already seen the place and agreed to the move. When she sits down to breakfast the next morning, she asks for a menu.

A young woman introduces herself as Vanessa (Carolyn Michelle Smith), and it becomes clear she is to be Ruth's main caregiver. Ruth refers to her as a new "friend," however. She is similarly confused when she meets Brian (Andy McQueen), a doctor at the facility. She has no problem identifying herself as Ruth Goldman, born in Brooklyn on March 6, 1937 (although she has apparently moved to Southern California long ago). She adds a few other details as well, and then she says to Brian, just before he takes her vitals, "Who the hell are you?"

She later wanders into the retirement home's huge kitchen and proceeds to take charge, explaining the quite complicated recipe for borscht that she has made or supervised in her previous restaurant career, and creating a somewhat awkward situation for her "coworkers."

The acting in *Familiar Touch* is uniformly good. Carolyn Michelle Smith is effective as the aide who must walk a fine line between watching over Ruth but also befriending and reassuring her. H. Jon Benjamin has the task of conveying the sadness and anxiety of Ruth's son, amid the painful realization that she no longer knows who he is.

Kathleen Chalfant stands out, as she must, considering the theme of the movie. Now 81 years old, she is known for decades of work in film, television and especially theater. Among her many well-known credits is the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama about an English professor dying of terminal cancer, *Wit*, from more than 25 years ago. She also played Ethel Rosenberg in Tony Kushner's acclaimed two-part *Angels in America* (1993), as well as a major part in *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004), the Off-Broadway play depicting the regime of indefinite detention and torture established by the US government at Guantanamo after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

One of Chalfant's most moving roles was in *The Last Letter* (2003), the powerful monologue play adapted from Vasily Grossman's epic novel *Life and Fate*, featuring a Jewish doctor in a Ukrainian ghetto writing her final testament to her son as the Nazis close in. This was the letter that the famous Soviet war journalist and novelist Grossman imagined his mother writing to him before she died in the Holocaust.

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Familiar Touch is the debut feature of 34-year-old Sarah Friedland, who is also a choreographer and has already made several short films on dance subjects. Friedland received some attention in 2024 when the present film won several prizes, including Best Debut Feature and Best Director for Friedland, at one section of the Venice International Film Festival. When she accepted the prize for Best Debut, Friedland said:

> As a Jewish American artist working in a time-based medium, I must note, I'm accepting this award on the 336th day of Israel's genocide in Gaza and 76th year of occupation. I believe it is our responsibility as film workers to use the institutional platforms through which we work to redress Israel's impunity on the global stage. I stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and their struggle for liberation.

Friedland is also, along with Chalfant, one of the thousands of signatories of the pledge launched four months ago by filmmakers and cinema workers to boycott Israeli film institutions "implicated in genocide."

Given these powerful stands, it is perhaps not surprising that Friedland, who also wrote the script for *Familiar Touch*, has, with the important acting contribution of Chalfant, made a film noteworthy for its empathy and social awareness.

While Chalfant and other members of the cast are professional actors, there were many small cameo roles that were taken by residents of the Villa Gardens Continuing Care and Retirement Community in Pasadena, California, where *Familiar Touch* was filmed. The semi-documentary style of the film is reminiscent of the work of Frederick Wiseman, famed director of such films as *Titicut Follies*, *Hospital*, *Belfast Maine* and *In Jackson Heights*, among many others. It was Wiseman, incidentally, who more than 20 years ago adapted the chapter of *Life and Fate* into the monologue that starred Kathleen Chalfant. (The WSWS interviewed him on the subject at the 2002 Toronto film festival.)

Wiseman, now 96 years old, has never claimed neutrality as far as his subjects and the way they are depicted are concerned. Neither is Sarah Friedland claiming neutrality. Keeping this in mind, while finding much to appreciate in *Familiar Touch*, there are some decisions of the writer and director that can legitimately be questioned.

The first issue is that of Ruth Goldman herself. Friedland clearly wants to counter the stereotypical prejudice that sees all those with dementia as having lost their identity and everything that makes them human. Left a bit unclear, however, is whether dementia should be seen as an illness. It is definitely not a normal part of aging. It would be wrong for viewers of this film to conclude that all or even most of those with Alzheimer's and other dementias retain as much of their personality as does Ruth. To recognize dementia as an illness, usually with tragic dimensions, does not of course mean that those afflicted should not be treated with the utmost dignity and without any condescension.

Related to this issue is Ruth's upper-middle class background. Without her resources, residence at such an upscale community as Villa Gardens would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. *Familiar Touch* is the most recent in a series of films on this subject that are confined to the middle classes. Clearly, the filmmakers are drawn to the topic but are also staying close to their own milieu. This doesn't invalidate what *Familiar Touch* has to say, but there are other issues that continue to be ignored, above all the warehousing of working class patients with dementia in nursing homes where they usually get minimal attention.

These issues or caveats notwithstanding, *Familiar Touch* is an empathetic look at the problems of aging, and of living with dementia in particular. The film is well worth viewing.

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