

Movie Review: "The Savages"™

by David_Elliott

Most of us get old. We all die. And some, before the end, draw the extra penalty card: senility requiring round-the-clock care.

'THE SAVAGES' - Old Lenny (Philip Bosco, center) poses a big set of problems for offspring Wendy (Laura Linney) and Jon (Philip Seymour Hoffman) in the drama 'The Savages.' CNS Photo courtesy of Andrew Schwartz/Fox Searchlight. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Those facts pretty fully define the sensitive soaper "The Savages," from director and writer Tamara Jenkins. She had considerably more fun, and delivered family truths with less underlining, in "Slums of Beverly Hills."

Old (77) Philip Bosco, in a very fine sunset performance, plays perfectly named Lenny Savage. Sick and fading, he has a grim temper and was probably never very likable. Clues indicate that his wife left long ago

because he took up with another woman, and there's a hint of past rages inflicted on the kids.

Now, they're middle-aged and flogging their ambitions. Wendy (Laura Linney) is a temp worker and aspiring playwright, overweight brother Jon (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a minor prof and Brecht specialist. They have lives more than lifestyles, and those lives wobble even more when they bring dad from Sun City in Arizona and park him in a Buffalo nursing home.

Jenkins visits all the stations of the dementia cross: ravings, fogged memory, embarrassments, mess, loss of adulthood. There is much use of pills and geriatric diapers, also darling pets and some goofy turns. Lenny treats other residents to Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer" even though most of the care staff is black.

The movie greedily uses its rich cast. Linney as Wendy is very decent but so tautly wired that she seems ready to break. She's the sort of impulse fusser who will stop sex with a man (appealing regular guy Peter Friedman) to worry about her ficus plant; we guess that years of parental neglect and bad manners made her so brittle.

Hoffman, having a great year, is extremely subtle. His Jon is a brilliant but willful survivor, jammed with inner ghosts. He looks upon his sister as still being Pill No. 1, with dad only a contender. Nobody else could probably make a neck relief harness both so pathetic and so funny.

Still, the best scenes are those Linney shares with Gbenga Akinnagbe as a gently empathetic male nurse at the home. They feel much less crowded with agenda, and Akinnagbe's warmth is a very sane oasis.

People who have dealt with the seriously sick and aged will find many points of contact. But the movie virtually checks off those points, like a sophisticated version of a care brochure. Thank heaven for good actors.

A Fox Searchlight release. Director, writer: Tamara Jenkins. Cast: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Laura Linney, Philip Bosco, Gbenga Akinnagbe, Peter Friedman. Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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