

Away From Her

It takes a certain amount of courage to heartily recommend a movie about the grim trajectory of Alzheimer's disease... Whoa, what a downer! Who could possibly be entertained by viewing the collapse of someone's identity? Fair enough, but let's argue that easy entertainment is hardly the point of all motion pictures; that some strive to illuminate life a bit or offer sympathetic, cathartic insights into our common humanity. Great, classic drama does this all the time, and fine films can do it too.

Now that I've warned you sufficiently, I can urge you to see, without qualm, *Away From Her*, a film that does beautifully illuminate the transition towards the end of life by showing what happens to one devoted couple as mental incapacity takes hold.

Professor Grant Anderson (Gordon Pinsent) and his wife Fiona (Julie Christie) have been married for almost 50 years. Though Grant has strayed from the marriage in the past, we find the couple living comfortably in a family house in the Canadian countryside with good books, cross-country skiing, handsome sweaters, and warm fires. Their by-play is natural and right; they are a venerable team whose lives are as clean and straight as the lines their skies make in the snow.

Yet Fiona's memory is inexorably slipping—Post-Its are necessary to identify the contents of her kitchen drawers. Both come to realize that she must be cared for at some institution. Fiona, willingly, and Grant, more wrenchingly, finally accept her entrance into “Meadow Lakes,” an establishment offering “extended care.” We spend most of the rest of the film with Gordon, as he visits Meadow Lakes, observes the changes in Fiona, bonds with one of the nursing staff, Kristy, (the very convincing Kristen Thomson), and tries to find ways to communicate with his ever-more-distant wife.

Grant watches, agonizingly, as Fiona warms up to the broken and wheelchair-bound Aubrey (Michael Murphy), an inmate who's plight, after a stroke, is worse than her own. Crumpled and mute, Aubrey is unlike any other character the easy-going Murphy (best known from his Robert Altman films) has portrayed. Fiona explains her attachment to this shadow of a man to the troubled Grant in one of the film's crucial lines: “He doesn't confuse me.” It leads Grant to seek out Aubrey's wife, Marian (a feisty Olympia Dukakis), to find something to share of his new life with another spouse left behind.

There are no easy solutions in *Away From Her*. The protagonists have taken on a set of new roles that aging has given them, and they must do their best with them. The film shows not so much slices of life, as a slicing away of one kind of life and the acceptance of another set of options. In fact, one of the things the picture shows is that, contrary to the idea that the mind-wasting disease is the ultimate soul killer for its victims, one Alzheimer sufferer can find herself a niche, a routine that is comfortable—she can re-arrange their world somehow and cope. From the first, Fiona seems to know what she has to do to let go, while poor Grant, so much more aware of the loss she is undergoing, suffers more.

This fine and sensitive, yet unflinching, look at what—in one form or other—will befall us all (yes, yes, I know you don't want to be reminded of that!) comes from an unexpected source. The writer/director of *Away From Her* is the first effort by the superb Canadian actress Sarah Polley, known for her varied roles in *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Go, Guinevere*, *The Claim*, among others. Not yet 30, Polley, adapting the short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" by Canadian writer Alice Munro, shows directorial class right out of the box. She has the maturity and taste (the film is impeccably directed) to translate the subtleties of this fiction into compelling cinema and to obtain impressive performances from actors more than twice her age. It is a bravura beginning.

And among those actors, Pinsent (a major Canadian actor), as the stoical Grant, gets the most screen time and mostly makes good use of it, though at times he seems too restrained, too cool, given what is happening in his life. It is just such steady restraint, however, which makes the small breaks in his composed surface that much more telling when they happen.

Then there is Julie Christie, riveting and heartbreaking as Fiona, a woman who is "losing it," know she's "losing it," yet maintains a dignity and charm that is immensely touching. Not seen in anything too memorable since *Afterglow* (1997), Christie adds a lustrous performance to her roster of fine movie roles over 40 years. And there is no vanity from this great actress, who plays a woman even older than herself (she is just 66) with a wonderfully weathered face, a tumble of gray-white hair, and a still-willowy figure. And those crystal-blue eyes, so penetrating since the early 1960's (even in black-and-white films like *Billy Liar* and *Darling*), still blaze with both intelligence and passion—even in a character in a declining mental state. Be assured that this is not a woman for whom you have to feel sorry. In sum: come and see *Away From Her* for the luminous Julie Christie; she's a pip!

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