

## Grandma

Lily Tomlin has been an entertainment icon for over 45 years (dating from TV's "Laugh-In") but, except for a few films in the 1970's and 1980's ("Nashville," "All of Me," "Nine to Five," etc.), her special comic personality has best suited the stage or the tube, not the movies. Now, at age 76, she is getting the role of her life on the big screen with the new Paul Weitz comedy/drama "Grandma." Guess whom she plays?

Aging poet and sourpuss Elle Reid (Tomlin) is still mourning the loss of her lifetime partner Vi when her 18-year-old granddaughter, Sage (Julia Garner), shows up needing help. Sage is freshly pregnant from a liaison going nowhere but feels she cannot tell her controlling mother, Judy (Marcia Gay Harden), about her condition, and pleads with her open-minded grandmother to fund an abortion she has already scheduled. Under pressure, Elle agrees to tool around Los Angeles in her ancient Dodge to tap various friends and acquaintances to raise the cash before Sage's late afternoon appointment time.

The two, testy at first, come to bond over Sage's dilemma as they successively put the touch on Elle's current love interest Olivia, (Judy Greer), a long-time bar owner Carla (Elizabeth Peña), a soul mate Deathy (Laverne Cox), and, finally, and most delicately, Elle's male lover from her early days, Karl (Sam Elliott), who suggests he will cover the costs only to back out because of earlier resentments. Eventually, the odd couple are forced to confront Judy, a driven businesswoman to ask her to fund the procedure.

The cast of strong actresses in featured roles works well, with veterans Greer, Harden, Peña, and Cox all doing nice turns. Sam Elliott shines, too, as the wounded ex-lover who can't quite forget his loss. He provides a surprise, too, when his usual downhome, laidback manner swerves into bitter resentment.

Providing a lovely balance to the seen-it-all Elle is Julie Garner as the winsome but clueless Sage. Garner (perhaps best known as the adolescent man-trap in "The Americans" TV series) avoids the stereotype of the jaded, wise-ass teenager so favored in Hollywood to emerge as both a relatively practical and genuinely naïve schoolgirl who needs help and guidance. That that guidance comes from a world-weary, agnostic lesbian produces much of the movie's comic spark.

As indicated, Lily Tomlin has rarely, if ever, carried a movie, but, with "Grandma," she is asked to do so, and she pulls it off. Fans of Tomlin will be familiar with her performing style and tics, including the wisecracks, the ironic asides, the acidic skepticism about life and its false promises. But here, they all fit her like a glove in the script written with her in mind by writer-director Paul Weitz.

In discussing his film while in Washington, writer/director Weitz said he "heard Lily's voice while writing the script" and "had no other next choice" when it came to casting the part. He had worked with her on an earlier film ("Admission") and was so impressed that he wanted to craft a strong central role for her. When she readily signed on, the rest of the cast fell into place.

Weitz also said he wanted to make "Grandma" outside the studio system, where he has worked most frequently. He did the film on a very low budget (a measly

\$600,000) with a tight shooting schedule (19 days in LA) and a small crew to be more intimate with his actors. He even used his own office to stand in for Judy's office in the film and took other necessary short cuts.

He said he wanted the film to balance comedy and drama--and even blend one into the other--in portraying a theme of "how you get past grief" in Elle's lamenting her loss of Vi (he earlier used the working title of "Get Over It" to accentuate that theme). Such shifts from comedy to drama happen throughout the film, as in the scene where banter between Elle and Karl coils suddenly into bitterness and another where a confrontation with an anti-abortion mom explodes into comedy when Elle is punched in the kisser.

I think "Grandma" *does* achieve the balance that Weitz sought, and Lily Tomlin has helped give him his best film since "About a Boy."

*(The film is rated "R" for language and mature themes and runs 80 mins.)*

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