

The Savages

You might think it tough to make a compelling movie about how two disaffected siblings reluctantly seek out residential care for their elderly, estranged father—and you would be right. Yet, writer-director Tamara Jenkins, in just her second feature film (her debut was *The Slums of Beverly Hills* in 1998), has pulled it off with *The Savages*, her humane and irreverent portrayal of a process so many of us must confront in dealing with aged parents

The *Savages* are Jon (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a morose literature professor living in Buffalo, his sister Wendy (Laura Linney), a “permanent temp” hustling for writing grants while scraping by in Manhattan, and Lenny (Philip Bosco), their irascible father who is slipping into dementia. At film’s opening, Jon and Wendy must pull Lenny from a comfortable Sun City enclave—where he has been a kind of kept senior—and find him a place to live. That turns out to be Buffalo, where the more settled Jon can at least keep an eye out for him, and where Wendy reluctantly moves temporarily. Jon—the practical one—gets dad accepted into a sterile nursing home, while Wendy—the emotional one—wants him placed in a more amenable (and expensive) assisted living facility.

The two fence and bicker about Lenny’s care, about their own relationship, about their uncertain futures. When Wendy protests about leaving New York City to stay in Buffalo, Jon stuns her with “Your life is more portable than mine.” To which the flustered Wendy can only sputter: “But I have a job-job!” Their tiffs do ultimately shift to understanding and to sharing in the care of a father who cared little for them.

The above summary can sound like *The Savages* harbors elements of the depressing and the treacly. Neither is the case, however, because Jenkins’ script is so truthful, and the acting is so believable. In a movie which hints of a tearjerker, there is honest sentiment but no sentimentality, off-hand humor, not easy pathos. Insights into this common predicament are neatly highlighted, as, for example, the realization that the desire to place the aged in a “nicer” facility aims more at salving the child’s conscience rather than serving the parent. One simple but moving example of who is serving whom comes about with the fate of a simple red pillow that Wendy buys her father—her symbol of repose, it turns out, not his. Oh, and did I mention that *The Savages* was also funny?

Making this trifecta work are the three leads. Hoffman is dead-on as the dogged professor of Brechtian analysis, a long-time solo act who has to come out of a bookish shell for once to confront the realities of elderly toilette and fatherly vindictiveness. We see him perceptively move from bottled up to resigned, then even forgiving.

Laura Linney, who can be so properly competent in some movies (like earlier this year in *Breach*), is here both naïve and a bit desperate, a woman who makes bad choices (like an affair going nowhere) then wonders why her life is so screwed up. Yet her Wendy is, at bottom, still warm and earnest, and her decent impulses when confronted with her father’s dilemma tug at Jon’s (and the audiences) heartstrings.

Oh! Dad himself, played by Bosco, is a kind of triumph of the Parent Rampant, the wizened old clot who can knock you over with his out-of-the-blue tirades. A more effective—or scary—vision of dementia has rarely been achieved in cinema. All three actors merit attention during the upcoming awards season.

Director Tamara Jenkins has said about her film: "I think *The Savages* is a story that is not just about confronting death but really also about seizing upon your life, even in the smallest of ways." She gets most of those telling details of life just right. (*"The Savages" is rated "R" for mature themes; running time 113 mins.*)

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Interview with Laura Linney

Laura Linney is a true movie actress with a dual screen personality, appearing as a reliable second lead in major studio pictures, but also starring in well-made independent films. *The Savages* places her again in that latter category and adds to her growing catalogue of fine performances (*The Squid and the Whale, Kinsey, Mystic River*, and especially *You Can Count on Me*). In DC to plug her latest movie, she is a statuesque woman with golden locks and sharp dimples next a ready smile and just as charming and intelligent as you might guess she would be.

Asked how she came to *The Savages*, she answered briskly: "The usual boring way," i.e., her agent sent her the script--which she loved. She knew of director Tamara Jenkins's work and had dealt with her on another project which didn't pan out. The task wasn't easy, though. "Like all good independent films, they are hard to get made. This one took one or two years." The ultimate shoot itself was a mere 30 days. Of her colleagues in the picture, she called co-star Philip Seymour Hoffman, who plays her brother, "one of the best," and added that "I love his work ethic and the standards he demands." She was just as high on Philip Bosco, who plays her estranged father.

Queried about her own experience with aging, Linney mentioned her grandmother, who lived in DC, and whom she visited often here when the latter was in a nursing home in the area. On aging itself, she was "scared to death of it," and noted "that in our whole culture (aging) is an area of dread." She remarked that "I've seen a lot of people die," emphasizing that "I've had the *privilege* of watching people die."

Linney trained for a career on stage (with study at Northwestern and Brown) and got into movies at 28 in 1992. She said "over the last ten years, I've gotten better in front of the camera... I always feel I'm learning on every project." And she has been busy. Since 1995, when she appeared as the female lead in *Congo*, she has appeared, in parts large and small, in 20 movies.

This interviewer, trying to be droll, asked Linney about her experience in the execrable *Congo*. She didn't laugh but instead earnestly said that the film added significantly to her education. "It was my first important film, and I was a theater kid." But it proved good for her because "there was no acting required; all I had to do was carry a big gun around." What she did gain was knowledge of film technique: she spent time in each department—lighting, camera, sound—and learned how each functioned. "I learned about the filmmaking process as I could not have done before." So the cruddy *Congo* somehow informed Laura Linney? "Absolutely."

Linney said her life has been acting; she has pursued no other career. "I have been drawn to it from the first (her father Romulus Linney, is a playwright)." Within her profession, she does some teaching. She has participated "a little" in master classes, including leading students in scene settings. She said, when traveling, that she likes to

give a day to students, handling Qs-and-As and doing acting demonstrations. Directing for her, however, is not in the cards—too demanding. “I am still so interested in and fascinated by what I get to do in acting that I don’t want to give up the time that it would take to direct.” Hers is a class act.