

Slice of life from a sliver of death

Screenplay by Tamara Jenkins

Directed by Tamara Jenkins

Laura Linney ... Wendy Savage

Philip Seymour Hoffman ... Jon Savage

Philip Bosco ... Lenny Savage

Peter Friedman ... Larry

David Zayas ... Eduardo

Gbenga Akinnagbe ... Jimmy

Wendy Savage: Maybe dad didn't abandon us. Maybe he just forgot who we were.

Jon Savage: We don't have to go after him Wendy; we're not in a Sam Shepard play.

Well, you know, I just figured anything with these two actors—Laura Linney (Wendy Savage) and Philip Seymour Hoffman (Jon Savage)—in it is going to be good. And I was right. From some previews I'd seen recently, it also looked as if the movie would be treading some new ground in the realm of the American way of death and dying... or at least warehousing our loved ones who are coming to the end of the line. Casting about in my mind for another movie of a similar theme, I recall Walter Matthau's final hurrah, *Hanging Up*, an absolutely fabulous movie for which Meg Ryan should have been nominated for an Oscar.

In *Hanging Up*, the father (Matthau) has a terminal illness, but it's not a mental one. In *The Savages*, ol' Pop (Lenny Savage, played 100% believably by Philip Bosco) has increasingly strong bouts of dementia. He's been living in Sun City, Arizona, with his girlfriend—the wife and the kids' mother abandoned the family years ago—who apparently has the financial wherewithal to put them both up in what's considered by many to be the nirvana of senior living.

The writer/director actually opens the movie by photographing these sunlit-perfect-day Sun City ranch homes from a moving automobile. The images convey a odd sense of lifeless sterility in an immense expanse of space... odd because one usually associates cloudless skies and sunshine with what everyone dreams of in life. The only problem is there is no evidence of life of any kind—except for an occasional cactus or shrub that can survive the stifling heat of the summer months down there—surrounding these homes. No one's walking, no one's sitting outside in the shade by the pool: you get the impression no one does anything much at all but sit inside their air-conditioned cocoons and watch TV.

Well, the plot kicks off shortly following the credits with Pop taking a gross exception to abiding by the rules of the home. I believe this incident is reported to Wendy, an aspiring playwright living on the margins in New York City and in a relationship of sorts with a married man, Larry (Peter Friedman), that is less than fully satisfying... for her, anyway. She calls her brother, Jon, and that's when we learn that, as the one who took the brunt of the father's abuse, he really doesn't give a frog's fat ass about getting his dad any special care.

Note: The following gives more detail of the plot than I usually let out, but it's important to give readers the essence of the movie.

Then the other shoe drops: the girl friend dies, which is troubling because her offspring, who were never very fond of Papa Savage, tell the Savage kids that their father is going to have to vacate the premises... and rather quickly. They, too, don't give a frog's fat ass about the old man. So suddenly the Savages are presented with a dilemma: Do they step up and take care of their dad, or will they stand back and let the state sweep him up?

This actually brings up a serious question that hadn't occurred to me before: Suppose in America, a person becomes unable to care for himself, yet has living relatives and/or offspring. Are those relatives or offspring legally compelled to do anything for him/her? In the case of the Savages, where the father is incapacitated, what happens if Jon and Wendy decide to take a bye, leave him to fate? Does the state

(social services) step in and move him to a facility, or do the cops just come and put him out on the sidewalk... from which he'll most likely wander around as a homeless person?

At the insistence of Wendy, Jon more or less agrees to work with the system to get their father into a care situation—a nursing home in Buffalo (where Jon lives and teaches college) with a euphemistic name—where Pop won't be wandering the streets and where the son and daughter can look in on him from time to time. The dialog, not to mention the social activity, between Jon and Wendy while they're working out their feelings is just about wonderful.

We see that the story is really not about the ending period for the old man, but about the development of his two majorly wounded-duck offspring. Both Jon and Wendy have literary ambitions of sorts: Wendy writes off-Broadway plays that have yet to catch on, and Jon has a special interest in Bertolt Brecht (a major intellectual force of 20th-century theater); Jon has been working on a book about Brecht for years, and seeking a publisher. I think this characterization of the siblings as aspiring—yet largely failed— creative people in the arts is important to the message of the movie: success cannot come until you resolve the false needs inherited from those authority figures who abandoned or abused you.

Or that's my best poke at it.

I've never been too attuned to symbolism in art, but I'm pretty sure this movie is dripping with it. Why is the surname of the family Savage? That's a pretty obvious question, and what I believe the writer is suggesting is that part of the process of dealing with the pain body—sorry, the pain body is a term from my main spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle—is to become "as a little child" (a primitive, a savage) to "enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Savages is full of character discovery and character blankout. Both Jon and Wendy thread a maze of experience—both as brother and sister and as human beings trying to survive and do the right thing in a situation that none of us wants to deal with. If I had a class on film and I wanted a movie that would generate a lot of discussion—on morality, on death and dying, on psychological health for intellectuals vs. "ordinary" people, on family relationships, and even on the politics of health care—I couldn't imagine a better movie than this one.

Is there a resolution? Of course. Is it a happy ending in the Randian tradition? I'll let you be the judge. In any case, I have a hunch The Savages will grow on people, becoming a modern classic.

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The Savages | *Laura Linney* | *Philip Seymour Hoffman* | *Dementia*