

# GRANDMA

**Monday, November 16, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by A. O. Scott— New York Times*   *Rated R*   *80 Mins.*

In need of cash — we'll get to why in a minute — Elle Reid, a poet and sometime professor in her 70s, decides to sell some precious old books. She figures that even though they're a bit worse for wear, her first editions of Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir should fetch a few hundred dollars at the local feminist bookstore-cafe. Her outrage when she's grudgingly offered a lot less than that compounds her dismay at her teenage granddaughter's cluelessness about the authors of "The Feminine Mystique" and "The Second Sex." What's wrong with the world these days?

That's a long conversation, but as of this writing one thing that is absolutely right with the world is the existence of "Grandma," Paul Weitz's wry and insightful movie about an eventful day in the life of Elle and her granddaughter. There is much to praise about this sweet, smart comedy of intergenerational conflict and solidarity: the way the script captures the speech patterns of the young, the old and the middle age; the way the story feels at once frantic and relaxed, as the two main characters race against the clock and meander through Los Angeles in Elle's wheezy vintage car; the brief, memorable appearances from supporting performers like Judy Greer, Sam Elliott and Elizabeth Peña (in one of her last roles). But honestly, the wonder that is "Grandma" can be summed up in two words: Lily Tomlin.

I'll spare you a lecture on the historical significance and cultural import of Ms. Tomlin, and her particular relevance to the popular culture of 2015. On second thought, I won't. Too much gets taken for granted these days. And while Ms. Tomlin has been a consistent presence on television, in movies, in recordings and onstage for roughly the past half-century — from "Laugh-In" to "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe" to "All of Me" to "The Magic School Bus" and beyond — she is currently having a bit of a renaissance, thanks to this movie and to "Grace and Frankie," the Netflix sitcom that splendidly pairs her with Jane Fonda. (I will save my lecture on the zeitgeist-transcending awesomeness of Ms. Fonda for another time.)

It's fitting that this renewal of attention arrives amid a flowering of feminist comedy, and worth acknowledging Ms. Tomlin's status as a foremother — a big sister, a wild aunt, however you want to put it — of the frank, fearless, funny women who have recently rescued American humor from its bro'ed-out doldrums. Tina Fey, the Amys (Poehler and Schumer), the ladies of "Broad City" and the shape-shifters of the current "Saturday Night Live" cast did not come out of nowhere. To revisit Ms. Tomlin's old LPs or videos of her one-woman shows is no more a matter of nostalgia than Elle's embrace of de Beauvoir and Friedan. It's a matter of memory, of understanding the continuities and ruptures of history. And that's the truth.

For Elle, this truth is personal as well as political, and anything but simple. "Grandma" is, among other things, a portrait of grief. For more than 30 years, Elle shared her life with Vi, whose relatively recent death casts a long shadow over Elle's daily routines. In the first few scenes, we see Elle brutally dumping her younger lover,

Olivia (Ms. Greer), and then weeping alone in the shower once Olivia has left. Bereavement, it seems, has set Elle firmly in her solitary, sarcastic ways. She doesn't talk much to Judy (Marcia Gay Harden), the daughter she and Vi raised together, and is therefore somewhat startled when Judy's daughter, Sage (Julia Garner), shows up at her door in need of help.

Sage is pregnant. She has an appointment for an abortion but not enough money to pay for it, and Elle, in a quixotic gesture of rebellion that is also a convenient plot device, has recently shredded her credit cards. Hence the trip to the bookstore-cafe (where Olivia happens to be working), and hence the zigzagging mini-road trip, during which they encounter Sage's jerky ex-boyfriend (Nat Wolff), an old flame of Elle's, and Judy, who makes both her mother and her daughter nervous, though for different reasons.



"Mom says you're a philanthropist," Sage says to her grandmother. The word she's looking for is misanthrope, but of course there is a core of tenderness and generosity underneath Elle's caustic surface. That might be the wrong way to put it. What Mr. Weitz and Ms. Tomlin understand about the character, and about many other feminists of her generation, is that her grouchiness and her compassion issue from the same source. She is impatient with the world and suspicious of the motives of a lot of people in it, but that is partly a result of her idealism, her uncompromising commitment to behaving like a free human being.

Elle is to some extent an elaboration of the maverick matriarch Ms. Tomlin played in "Admission," Mr. Weitz's uneven and unsatisfying 2013 comedy. "Grandma" is a much more lucid film, less crowded with story points and more open to the idiosyncrasies of its characters. It regards them all, in particular Sage, Judy and Elle, with clarity and sympathy, acknowledging the distinct risks and opportunities each one faces as she tries to pursue happiness and avoid compromise.

Judy, like many children of bohemian parents, is a driven, disciplined professional. Sage, like many children of superachieving parents, is diffident and a little adrift. Ms. Garner, with her nimbus of curls and her delicate features, looks far too childlike for the predicament she finds herself in. But Sage is tougher than she looks, and like her mother and her grandmother, she is much more than an easy comic archetype. Mr. Weitz treats them all with a fondness that feels entirely unforced, and his sentimental tendencies are balanced by their mostly dry-eyed performances, and above all by Ms. Tomlin's peppery honesty.

Someone should start a petition to put her face on the \$20 bill. It wouldn't solve all our problems, but it would be a pretty good start.



**Monday, December 7, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by Stephanie Zacharek-Village Voice Rated PG-13 109 Mins.*

In the mid-twentieth century, movie audiences understood the value of a good melodrama: A picture like *Now, Voyager* or *Black Narcissus* or almost anything by Douglas Sirk could be an urn into which you could pour your own unarticulated feelings of loss and loneliness. The heightened, unrealistic intensity of those movies wasn't a mistake that the filmmakers somehow failed to correct, but a way of drilling past everyday surface anxieties — the random little worries that plague us — to get to a deeper stratum of emotional intensity, the feelings we so often push down in the mere act of living. Melodrama hasn't died — it survived through the Eighties and Nineties with effective, if not necessarily good, pictures like *Ghost* and *The Bridges of Madison County* — but it seems that today's audiences are wary of it, preferring to get it filtered through the spectacle of superheroes. For now, the old-fashioned, mainstream Hollywood melodrama is a fairly dormant art form. What will the Americans who get to see Zhang Yimou's tender and unapologetically fervent *Coming Home* make of it?

*Coming Home*, Zhang's first film since the 2011 historical drama *The Flowers of War*, is pure melodrama, with all the unfiltered feeling that promises. The story opens in the early-to-mid-1970s, near the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. Political prisoner Lu (Chen Daoming, who played Emperor Qin in Zhang's 2002 *Hero*) escapes and tries to make his way home to his wife, Feng (the marvelous Gong Li, who has often worked with Zhang), and teenage daughter Dan Dan (newcomer Zhang Huiwen), who was a toddler when he was taken away. The authorities have told both Feng and Dan Dan about the escape, urging them to report back if Lu tries to contact them. Feng is loyal; Dan Dan, an aspiring ballerina hoping to curry favor with state officials, sees her father on the landing of the family's flat and betrays him to the authorities, unbeknownst to Feng; he's captured the next day, just as Feng has gone to the train station to meet him, secretly, with provisions. As he's being taken away, Feng falls and suffers a head injury. Three years later, at the end of Mao's decade-long purge, Lu is released — only to discover that Feng no longer recognizes him. She's certain her husband will appear soon — she clings to the date she's been told he'll return, "the fifth of the month" — but she considers the man before her a stranger.

*Coming Home* — which was adapted from a novel by Yan Geling, who also wrote the source material for *The Flowers of War* — comes together with soft, stippled brushstrokes rather than broad plot turns. The movie's delicate surprises take shape in the ways Lu reconnects with his wife, and in how he makes peace with Dan Dan, whose actions have driven her and her mother apart. Cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding extends that gossamer touch to the look of the film. The family's modest apartment is shot in muted, cozy gray tones; Dan Dan's ballet rehearsal — in which a troupe of muscular young dancers pirouette and leap with wooden rifles as props — is more vibrantly colorful, though it suggests a false promise, the allure of following the rules as opposed to the clean, frightening thrill of breaking them.

Zhang teases out the best in his actors, or perhaps he knows enough to just sit back and watch and listen. Gong and Chen give performances that feel lived in, like clothes whose very threads have become attuned to the shape and movement of the wearer. In the movie's most stunning section, Lu has a small trunk delivered to Feng. It's too heavy for her to lift — he carries it for her. It's difficult to open — he helps raise the lid. Inside are hundreds of letters written on scraps of paper, letters that Lu had written Feng from prison but was unable to send. She looks at them in awe, wondering why the handwriting is so illegible. "Perhaps," Lu says kindly, "they were written in the dark." He offers to read the letters to her, returning each day to read more. When she greets him cheerfully at the door — "You're the letter-reading comrade!" — Lu's eyes show amusement and joy, but you can't miss the thrumming undercurrent of sadness.

What must it be like to have the person you love best look right past you, unable to see that you're the very person she needs? *Coming Home* obviously has historical and political significance for Chinese who lived through the Cultural Revolution, and for families that were torn apart by it. But Zhang tells this particular story in a deeply personal way — the time and place of its setting have a specific meaning, but its emotional contours spread out into something bigger. When I first saw the film, in Cannes in 2014, I was shaken by its emotional straightforwardness. Later, I was dismayed by the number of critics who sniffed at it. Some called it a film only likely to resonate with Chinese audiences, a roundabout way of suggesting that Americans aren't open to stories that might demand some connection with another culture. Others dismissed it as corny or a tearjerker.



I cringe at the word "tearjerker," perhaps because I'm never fully sure what it indicates: that it's bad or stupid to cry at movies? That movies that make us cry are cheaply manipulative and thus automatically suspect? It's true that terrible movies are often capable of getting the waterworks going. (I wept at the end of *The Perfect Storm*, though I wouldn't want to vouch for the picture's craftsmanship.) But "tearjerker" is too often used as a viewer's — or a critic's — way of asserting superiority over the material. And the whole point of melodrama — its allure and its danger, especially for those whose job is not just to watch movies, but to scrutinize them — is to make us surrender. When I think of Chen's Lu reading his own letters to his wife, I'm unembarrassed about giving in to *Coming Home*. Sometimes you just have to ask yourself one question: Why else go to the movies?

In Mandarin with English Subtitles.

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# PHOENIX

Monday, December 21, 7:30 pm

Special Screening at the Ogden 6 Theatre  
1227 East Ogden Avenue, Naperville, IL

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan Not Rated 98 Mins.

"Phoenix" is an intoxicating witches' brew, equal parts melodrama and moral parable, that audaciously mixes diverse elements to compelling, disturbing effect.

The latest collaboration between German writer-director Christian Petzold and star Nina Hoss (their last film together, "Barbara," was a knockout) is set in Berlin in 1945, in the immediate aftermath of World War II. But its penetrating examination of how individuals endure the unthinkable makes it relevant and contemporary.

From its opening nighttime scene at a desolate U.S. Army checkpoint to its evocative Stefan Will jazz score and the soundtrack prominence of Kurt Weill's haunting "Speak Low," "Phoenix's" reliance on bleak film noir elements is immediately recognizable.

Equally unmistakable is the influence of other flamboyantly plotted films, most noticeably Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo" but also classic noirs like "Laura" or outré items like George Franju's spooky "Eyes Without a Face."

But because of the time and place of its setting and its Holocaust survivor theme, "Phoenix" has a great deal more on its mind than the genre moments it expertly delivers.

Inspired by the French novel "Le Retour des Cendres" by Hubert Monteilhet, "Phoenix" is able to deal with questions of obsession, forgiveness, ambiguity and identity as well as core issues like the horrors we are capable of and what makes us who we are.

In all of this, "Phoenix" is helped a great deal by the delicate, nuanced performance by Hoss, very much the German actress of her generation, who was seen alongside the late Philip Seymour Hoffman in last year's crackling "A Most Wanted Man."

Hoss' Nelly Lenz is first met at that U.S. Army checkpoint, in a car driven by lifelong friend Lene Winter (Nina Kunsendorf), but her face is so covered with white gauze bandages that we never get a clear look at it.

Which is just as well because Nelly, who was a nightclub singer before the war, is a disfigured Jewish survivor of the concentration camps who had been shot in the face and left for dead.

Lene, who escaped Germany while she could, has returned to care for her friend and tells Nelly that because all her family has perished she has inherited a sizable sum of money.

Lene takes Nelly to a plastic surgeon for facial reconstruction. The survivor says she wants to look exactly like her old self, but the

surgeon, who advises her that "a new face is an advantage, it won't be identifiable," also tells her that even an attempt at a replica often does not look like the original. Which, to Nelly's initial despair, is what happens.

An attorney who works for the Jewish Agency for Palestine, Lene has plans to move herself and Nelly to Haifa, where they can both "help found a state where Jews can be free." But the assimilated Nelly, who never considered herself Jewish (though the Nazis begged to differ), has another plan. His name is Johnny.

A jazz pianist, Johnny was Nelly's husband before the war, and the memory of him is one of the things that kept her alive in the camps. Even though Lene, suspicious of Johnny's actions, cautions her against any connection with him, Nelly cannot be dissuaded. As Petzold says in a director's statement, "I'm interested in people who don't accept something and, in doing so, are defiant and stubborn."



Hollow-eyed and distraught, with her face still badly bruised from the surgery and feeling "I no longer exist," Nelly wanders through Berlin like a haunted zombie, desperate to both track down Johnny and recover her identity as an individual.

As Petzold shrewdly explains, Hoss' work conveying this post-camp state of mind comes despite the fact that "as an actor, she can only imagine the torture; she hasn't been through it. But what she can do is act out this impossibility: the impossibility of conveying something, behind which the character's experiences lie."

It doesn't take long for Nelly to encounter Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld, Hoss' excellent "Barbara" costar), working as a harried busboy in a club in the American sector called Phoenix. Because of the surgery he does not recognize her, yet something is undeniably familiar about her, which gives him an idea.

Nelly also has an idea. Obsessively desperate to be close to Johnny, and prodded by Lene to be curious about his role in her arrest, Nelly goes along with Johnny's scheme to further both aims, with unnerving results. As both characters try to find their footing and in a sense attempt to forget the Holocaust even happened, "Phoenix" uses its excellent cast and psychological acuity to get under our skin and chill us to the bone.

In German with English subtitles.

*Please join us for our thought provoking post screening discussions!*

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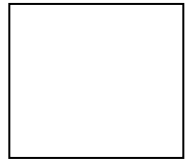
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**GRANDMA**

"Acerbically funny . . . Lily Tomlin giving a career-capping performance."

*Stephen Holden, New York Times*

Monday, November 16 at 7:30 pm

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"Emotionally powerful. . .Richly nuanced."

*New York Times*

Monday, December 7 at 7:30 pm

A title card for the film 'Coming Home' featuring the words 'COMING HOME' in a large, serif font. The background is a light, textured grey with small white specks, and there are faint silhouettes of birds in flight.

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**PHOENIX**

"A post-war masterwork by way of 'Vertigo'."

*Slant Magazine*

Monday, December 21 at 7:30 pm  
at the Ogden 6 Theatre