

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

GRANDMA To The Rescue

Sophia Stein · Friday, August 28th, 2015



Lily Tomlin and Writer/Director Paul Weitz, "GRANDMA."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

I have been a fan of the honestly complex comedies from writer-director Paul Weitz ever since *About a Boy*, the feature film that he co-wrote and co-directed with brother Chris Weitz, back in 2002. The brothers scored an Academy-award nomination for that screenplay. Roger Ebert wrote of Hugh Grant's performance in the film: "The Cary Grant department is understaffed and Hugh Grant shows here that he is more than a star, he is a resource."

With *GRANDMA*, Paul Weitz delivers once again a stellar vehicle for a formidable star. Lily Tomlin plays a delightfully cranky defender of her teenage granddaughter's reproductive rights in this freshly subversive comedy with balls. I found myself laughing out loud, right from the start of this disarming film.

I remember falling hard as a fan for Lily Tomlin at a young age, being mesmerized by her comedic gifts on *Laugh-In*. When I watch the original Ernestine and Edith Ann clips back, Tomlin's signature characters feel as fresh today as they did when she brought them to life on national television in "69. Her Broadway show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, written by her once-upon-a-time partner, now wife, Jane Wagner, was all the rage in my memory of the 80s and 90s. Tomlin has worked so consistently across so many forms: stand-up, stage, television, film. The immensity of Tomlin's creative output over so many years is staggering to consider. With *GRANDMA* opening in theatres throughout the country and the Netflix series *Gracie and Frankie* (with co-star Jane Fonda) streaming all across the internet, Tomlin shows no signs of releasing the pedal from the metal on a career running strong into its fifth decade.

The smart ensemble of the film, *GRANDMA*, includes Julia Garner as Tomlin's jail-bate granddaughter, Sage; Marcia Gay Harden, as her Type A++, no caffeine required mother, Judy; Nat Wolff as the douchebag teen who done her granddaughter wrong, Cam; and Sam Elliott as a feisty old flame that just won't extinguish, Karl. Judy Greer plays Tomlin's much younger and newly-minted love interest, Olivia; and Laverne Cox plays the friend who reneges on a loan but gives good tattoo, Deathy.

"The film is largely about moving on from loss through wit and empathy and the ability to say 'screw you,'" Paul Weitz interprets. Weitz is an unabashed, self-proclaimed feminist. "I would have said that even before Emma Watson's lovely speech to the UN," he holds bragging rights. Where the schools are failing our kids, I feel relieved that cinema under the insightful and sensitive

direction of feminist Paul Weitz is picking up the tab.

I was delighted to speak with the very talented writer-director of *GRANDMA*, Paul Weitz, at the Fairmont Hotel San Francisco.

Sophia Stein: After I saw *GRANDMA*, I wondered if Lily Tomlin had pitched the concept to you — because the only men who are talking about abortion at the present time, are the right wing, right-to-lifers who are working to make it illegal and to defund Planned Parenthood. What was the impetus for you to write this female-driven story?

Paul Weitz: I had spent time with Lily on the set of *Admission* (she had played Tina Fey's mom in that film), and she just stuck in my head as somebody really funny, really forceful, and really poignant in that she has lived through so much American history. Be that women's history, gay history, or creative history, Lily has come through it all with her wit and kindness unscathed. I felt she killed in her scenes in that movie, and I thought that it would be fantastic to have her play the lead in a movie.

I've made a couple of films in the past about mentorship. *About A Boy* is about how mentoring somebody can change you. That comedy dealt with some issues that I don't normally associate with a comedy — Toni Collette's character in that movie attempts suicide. And if I look back at another comedy — *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (directed by Amy Heckerling) — part of that movie is Jennifer Jason Leigh's character who gets knocked up by a dirt-bag and has an abortion. I can't remember at the time whether anyone paid any particular attention to that fact or made a stink about it.

In the case of *GRANDMA*, it was just what occurred to me when I sat down to write. There was this eighteen year old girl who wanted money from her grandmother because she was pregnant and had scheduled an abortion at the end of the day, and she did not want to wait a single day more. So the two of them were stuck together on this road trip. Adding Lily's voice to that mix, the whole thing made sense.



Lily Tomlin (*Elle*), Nat Wolff (*Cam*), and Julia Garner (*Sage*), "*GRANDMA*."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: You have observed, "Comedy is depressing unless it is character driven."

Paul: I think that there is nothing worse than trying to make somebody laugh. I'm always reminded of that scene in *Annie Hall* where Woody Allen's character is auditioning to be the joke writer for this horrible Catskill comedian, who just sits there with his fake smile plastered on his face. Allen happens to be able to write brilliant jokes. At a certain point in his career, he made a transition towards more purely character-based humor.

I like things where you can't extricate the drama from the comedy essentially. When I was first getting into writing, my big hero was Chekhov. He would call his play a comedy in four acts, and then Stanislavsky would direct them as dramas with very little laughter. Chekhov was always upset about that. That really struck me; that's the kind of work I like to do.

Having said that, there is a scene (in the trailer, so I'm not spoiling anything), in which Lilly's character goes after the dirt-bag baby daddy played by Nat Wolff — with a hockey stick. And I

suppose that is somewhat broad — although it is actually understandable in the moment. So I'm not beneath physical comedy.

I like comedy that includes all different kinds of humor. There are a couple of broad things in this movie; at the same time, there are scenes that are funny simply because you feel like you know Lily Tomlin's or Laverne Cox's character — you know what they're going through.



Julia Garner (Sage) and Lily Tomlin (Elle), "GRANDMA."

Photo by Aaron Epstein, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: When you worked with Lily Tomlin on *Admission*, you had this impression that she would be invaluable to a young woman under duress. What did she say or do during that shoot that gave you this impression?

Paul: She was completely unpretentious. Lily is totally herself. We were flying up here from Los Angeles today, she was seated in row two of the plane, and I was in row one, and she turned to her friend and said, "Oh, great, we can lob jelly beans at his head." In some ways, I imagine that her fame really hasn't affected her in any particular way.

She is just really funny, and she is also really dedicated. Her character, Elle, was fixing a bike in one scene and instead of faking it, in every take, Lily was actually stripping and then putting back on the bicycle chain. When I arrived at set that day, she was there early, greasing up. She had grease on her hands and her knees; she was learning how to fix a bike. She's really dedicated, and she just loves the game of make-believe. As do I ...

Sophia: Do you remember the first time in your life that you ever saw Lily Tomlin act or perform?

Paul: I think it might have been in the film *Nashville* — which is odd because one doesn't necessarily think of Lily Tomlin as a dramatic actress. But that was her first movie ... *Nashville* was screened at my college. I think probably saw a little bit of *Laugh-In* here or there, but I missed *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* and a lot of cool stuff. But Lily really struck me and got under my skin in that dramatic role in *Nashville*.

Sophia: As a comedian, you have compared Lily Tomlin to Chris Rock – in that they are both fearless and not afraid of being transgressive.

Paul: No question. On set, Lily was doing a shtick for me that she's done over the years, of a woman who is the life of the party at a funeral: She picks up the corpse and uses it as a ventriloquist dummy to try cheer people up. That really cracked me up.

We wrapped the movie at 3:00 am, and the same day, she went and did her one-woman show for two hours and fifteen minutes, which I caught. It is sort of stand-up — but it also involves different characters and quotes and things from the past. It is really edgy, funny, and outspoken.



Julia Garner, Writer/Director Paul Weitz, Lily Tomlin and Marcia Gay Harden, "GRANDMA."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: You wrote the screenplay, *GRANDMA*, "hearing Lily's voice" in your head. Did you

engage her collaboration in the process of writing the first draft of the screenplay?

Paul: I wrote it first. (*I didn't want to tell her I was writing it because I was worried that she would, you know, make a face or something.*) And then I kind of sprung it on her. She read it, and she was interested. But then I had months to go over everything with her. Lily recounted how once, when she and her partner Jane were in Las Vegas walking home one night, they saw a little girl walking along the road alone. Jane went over to the girl, leaned in and asked, "Are you O.K.? Where are your parents, sweetheart?" And the girl punched her in the face! I kind of stole that for a little part of the movie.

At first when I showed Lily the script, she puzzled: "This character is so angry, I'm not sure I understand where some of her anger is coming from?" Then, she added: "And I know that you have probably seen that video of me yelling at David O. Russell and think that this is an ironic thing I'm saying ..." [Big laugh.]

There is a line in the film where her granddaughter tells her: "You have an anger problem." And she responds: "No, I don't have an anger problem, I have an asshole problem. When someone is an asshole to my granddaughter, I get angry!" That was key. So we went through every bit to see what she was getting so cranked up about. In the end of it all, Elle sort of lets go of her anger, sets it aside, and begins to move on from the loss that she has experienced.



Marcia Gay Harden (Judy), Lily Tomlin (Elle), and Julia Garner (Sage), "GRANDMA."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: The film also deals, more tangentially, with the issue of aging.

Paul: Yeah, no question, the movie is about aging. There is a degree to which the film is a bit of a Don Quixote story. Elle is someone who is "tilting at windmills." She has lived through the point in history when it was illegal to get an abortion. (Which clearly didn't stop people from getting abortions — it simply meant that getting one was twenty times more dangerous!) Elle sets out on a quest, which turns out to be to teach her granddaughter how to stand up for herself.

In the process, you do get the impression that Elle has had this very combative relationship with her own daughter, Judy (played by Marcia Gay Harden). Judy says horrible stuff to Elle in the movie; she calls her an awful mother. In the end, you are left with the impression that the two of them are possibly going to begin to get over the issues that they've had.

This character, Elle, is a woman who raised a daughter with another woman in an era when there was even less understanding and acceptance than there is today. How much guts did that take? What was the price paid by her daughter in terms of being subjected to the stupidity of the other kids at school? And how much beauty is there in that.

At the beginning of the movie, there are a couple of moments that are very important to me. Lily's character is looking through old memorabilia, and there is a picture that her daughter drew for her when she was a kid, which says: "I love my moms" — with a picture of Lily and the partner who has died.

The film is also about how time, I think, is not as linear as we think. To some degree, that is what is going on in the sequence with Sam Elliott. These two people shackled up together for two

months, she split in the middle of the night and ended up with another woman, and he has been carrying a torch for her ever since. It's funny, and at the same time, there is a huge fight that they have avoided having for fifty years. They get looped back to that moment in their lives where this big event happened. The reason that sequence works is that they're thrown right back to when they were in their early twenties. She's finally brave enough to talk with him about it, and he's finally able to be vulnerable about it.



Sam Elliott (Karl), "GRANDMA."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: Sam Elliott is really enjoying a renaissance. He was so delightful in *I'll See You in My Dreams*, and now that sequence with Lily in this movie is so powerful. It is so nuanced, and there are so many twists and turns.

Paul: I wasn't quite sure how he was going to do it. When I started writing it, I wasn't sure what was going on with that character. He was just kind of funny and a little bit menacing – almost like a Pinter character. He says: "When you smile, you are showing your teeth, and that's the only part of you that's going to look the same when you are dead." It's such an odd thing for this seemingly charming man to say.

Sophia: You depict something that is so honest with Marcia Gay Hardin as Sage's mom. Hardin just hits the nail right on the head to capture how intimidating a parent can be. I love the scene where Sage admits that her mom scares her, and Elle admits that her daughter scares her, as well. That's so true!

Paul: I know, I know. Thank you. You can also see how growing up around these two really formidable women has kind of sucked all the air out of the room for Julia's character, Sage.



Lily Tomlin (Elle) and Julia Garner (Sage), "GRANDMA."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: Can you talk about casting Julia Garner, whom you have compared to Jean Harlow and Marlene Dietrich, as the granddaughter. When we see her on screen, we cannot help but to be taken in by her stunning beauty. But she is so clearly a girl in a woman's body, and that causes us a slight degree of trepidation.

Paul: You understand why she is not ready to bring up a child at this point in her life. At least, she knows that about herself. I knew that Lily was going to have so much of the dialogue that whomever I cast in that role was going to have to be really interesting to look at and able to keep their emotions close to the surface. I thought Julia was lovely and that she was her age. That character, Sage, doesn't know how to articulate herself. She is just trying to get ahold of the reigns of her life.

Lily really kind of loved her from the first time they met. Sometimes you have this image of an actor as someone who is very ambitious and working angles, but Julia is clearly the opposite. There is something quirky and not of this time about her. Like me, Lily is a huge film buff. So I bet that for Lily also, there was something subconscious about how Julia looks a little bit as if she stepped out of the 1930s.



Julia Garner (Sage), "GRANDMA."

Photo by Aaron Epstein, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: How did you cast the car, that wonderful 1955 Dodge Royal that grandma and granddaughter use on their quest?

Paul: I was just looking for a car, and I called Lily up (as I did with everything in this movie) and said, "Hey, I'm going to be picking a car. What kind of a car do you think Elle would drive?" And she said, "Well, why don't you come to my house because I've got something sitting in my garage that I haven't driven for twenty years. Jane has forbade me from driving it because it is not in great shape." So I went over, and the thing was fantastic. It was so full of personality. It was this big boat that I knew I could fit a camera into. We had it tuned up, and Lily is actually able to drive it. There are a couple of shots of the two of them driving from behind, for which I was sitting with a wig in the driver's seat — so I know first-hand just how terrifying that car is to drive! You kind of have to press the brake down well before you're going to stop. It was really fortuitous.

Sophia: You had previously mentioned the scene where Grandma shakes down baby-daddy Cam for the money for the abortion — which is just hysterical. When being questioned about whether they used a condom, Cam defends himself, saying: "Look, she said it wasn't her time." Elle counters: "What are you a moron? ... What are you both morons? Don't they teach kids sex ed anymore?" I feel like this movie picks up the burden in assuming moral responsibility for sexual education that has been forsaken by the schools, to offer some straight talk about abortions.

Paul: Yeah, we're in litigious days. It's true. The fact that his term for the quote-unquote "rhythm method" of birth control is: "It's not your time" — is such mumbo-jumbo. The movie is partly about how much we have forgotten or erased, or about how much we are afraid of teaching kids now.

Sophia: As a parent, have you broached these issues yet with your kids?

Paul: I have an eleven year old daughter, and yes, we've discussed what abortion is. We've discussed women's rights. She is a staunch defender of gay rights. The other day at school, there were a couple of boys who were giving a hard time to a girl with two dads, and my daughter started arguing with them. They called my daughter a lesbian, and she reported them to her teacher who sent them all to the principal's office. They were so naïve, the two boys lied claiming that my daughter had called *them* lesbians. (So, possibly they didn't know exactly what the word meant.)

Sophia: In preparing for this interview, I was curious to learn that you are also a playwright. How does that process of being a playwright compare to being a screenwriter?

Paul: It's a totally different rhythm. I am very lucky to get to do it. It gives you a different perspective on budgets and what a low budget in film is — because inevitably, your play is lower budget than that! If you do your job properly as a film director, at some point, the film is in the hands of the actors. But in theatre, literally, they're editing their own performances as they are doing it. Everything is in the hands of the actors, which makes it really fun.

Sophia: Do you have anything in the New York theatres that we could see this fall?

Paul: I wish. My last play, *Lonely I'm Not*, featured Topher Grace and Olivia Thirlby. It was about a guy who had a breakdown. I don't know if you ever saw my film, *In Good Company* with Topher and Dennis Quaid? (That's a cool film. If you like *About a Boy*, you would like that film.) Anyway, I took that same character from my film, *In Good Company*, and I wrote a play about him.

The female character in the play is a blind business woman. I did a lot of research in writing the part. There is this wonderful woman who works for Barclays in London who is blind and told me all sorts of stuff – like what it is like to be in a conference room with twelve other businesspeople and how she figures out where each person is sitting in the room, what it is like romantically to date sighted people, to meet their parents for the first time, to visit their home and how because you don't know where everything is in the room, you can't necessarily move around in the way that you would like. She talked about how because she can't read facial cues, when she is in a business meeting, it allows her, in a good way, to be sort of be a bull in a china shop – but also, how then she cannot tell if what she is saying is pissing somebody off or not. All my plays are published, mostly by Dramatists Play Service.



Laverne Cox (Deathy) and Julia Garner (Sage), "GRANDMA."

Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: I read that your grandfather was an agent and a producer in the golden era of Hollywood. What lesson did your grandfather and his circle of legends impart to you?

Paul: Well, his last words to me were, "Eat soup." He was very cynical. He was cronies with Billy Wilder and John Huston, who was his client for over fifty years. They were a very kind but unsentimental bunch. So he kind of made fun of me sometimes. I had a play come out, fortunately before he died, which he saw, which he did not particularly like reading. But then it got very good reviews, and he called me up and said, "Today, I'm eating humble pie. Humble pie." I really loved him.

Sophia: I was raised reading all the seminal feminist literature in the 70s and 80s, and it was only in the 90s, when I was teaching at a boarding school in the South that I realized that the young women I was teaching were reluctant to call themselves feminists. Have you always identified as a feminist?

Paul: I have probably identified as a feminist from my mid-twenties on. I went to all-boys schools as a kid and that was definitely not a breeding ground for feminism. It was quite the opposite. But I can remember specifically, I read a book called *Women's Ways of Knowing*. The premise of the book was that girls learn differently from boys, with the observation that when girls hit puberty, they stop talking in class because that is not makes them "societally" attractive. Then, the Anita Hill trial broke something in me. I thought it was such a tragedy. Anita Hill was clearly so articulate. Watching her being grilled by these male Senators was like watching a show trial. That was big for me, actually, to realize: Wow, this society is actually sexist!

Sophia: Thank you for this film. It fills in something that is missing. I think it's going to have a cult following for years to come. Love the film.

Paul: Thanks. It's very gratifying for me because it wasn't purposeful. I actually didn't set out even necessarily to write a feminist film. — Although it is utterly feminist. It was just that I had

gotten to a point where I was able to write these characters and have them do the work for me. It's aiming to represent a perspective, that we have not yet arrived at in our society — the concept that your sexual orientation is besides the point, that there are other things which are more interesting to focus on in terms of your identity. We are certainly not there culturally, yet.

Maybe, it will be a tiny bit sad when we do get there. I mean, Lily joked about it: "It's almost a little sad that gay marriage is legal because, you know, the sort of outlaw, hipness factor ... however, it's worth the sacrifice, obviously." So I'm really happy that while this film is trending on all of these issues, that it's a comedy, and that it's a human comedy.

Top Image: Lily Tomlin (Elle), "GRANDMA." Photo by Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

GRANDMA — Official Website



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