

## **REEL IMAGES OF AGING**

**Notes from VAN Monthly Forum, Tuesday, February 12, 2003  
Fridley Community Center**

### **INTRODUCTIONS**

The facilitator for the forum, Jan Hively, asked the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group about films that come to mind when they think about aging. Here is the list of films that were mentioned:

- About Schmidt
- Whales of August
- The Banger Sisters
- On Golden Pond (mentioned four times)
- The Story Lady
- Driving Miss Daisy
- Something's Gotta Give
- Strangers in Good Company
- Calendar Girls
- Harold and Maude
- Three Coins in a Fountain
- Gigi
- Normal
- Big Fish
- Dancing with a White Dog
- Murder She Wrote (TV)
- Innocence
- As Time Goes By
- Foxfire
- The Gin Game
- I Do, I Do (musical)
- Whale Rider
- Secondhand Lions
- Golden Girls (TV)
- Tell Me a Riddle
- In the Line of Fire
- Flowers for Algernon
- Charley

### **ROBERT YAHNKE, PRESENTER**

Jan introduced Professor Robert Yahnke, who teaches about social issues through the study of films at the University of Minnesota. One of his seminars is called "The Art of Aging." His research focuses on the contributions of film and literature on gerontological education.

Professor Yahnke said that the filmography on aging is so large that he could do 20 presentations. But whatever films he shows, he will always be focusing on the same four themes:

1. Time
2. Memory
3. Identity
4. Intimacy

Robert showed clips and described how these themes play out in a few films:

**DRIVING MISS DAISY.** As Jessica Tandy is driven by her handyman/chauffeur, Hoke, to visit relatives in Mobile, she reminisces about her youth, but no flashbacks are used. Her youth is inside her, held in her memories, but she is seen as “old” all the way through the film. This fits the way we are seen most of the time -- in the present and old, if we have grey hair. Most of those who see us are stopped, right there. They don’t see the youth inside. “They see me as a threatening image of their future.” “I see myself at the top of the mountain. They see me as halfway down the other side.”

“Life is lived at the edges. It sneaks up on you.” Miss Daisy had not tasted life since the last time she was at the seashore, tasting the salt water. She’s always been hungry and lonely, never able to get over the discrepancy between her poverty in youth and her wealth in old age. Hoke, who nurtures Daisy with affection, becomes her best friend, helping her to open up to her feelings. In the last scene of the film, when she is in a nursing home, unable to feed herself, he feeds her some pie so that she can taste the sweetness of life again.

“Do you think that Hollywood is becoming more sensitive, thus combatting ageism?” Robert said that he is a misanthrope in his thinking about Hollywood. He sees that they are marketing to a consumer society to make money. The producers are not going to choose to make a film about an old couple. There are a lot of risk factors associated with this subject matter. International films such as the Swedish film, “A Song for Martin,” would not be acceptable in the U.S. (One reason they are produced there is because the film industry receives government subsidies in Europe.) Similarly, “Wit”, produced and directed by Mike Nichols, was not acceptable for theaters – only for HBO. But there may be a change, led by middle-aged actresses who are feeling stymied. “Calendar Girls” expresses this energy. A few of them shared ideas in a recent TV interview about where they might go next. Boomer women will try to influence change.

**WIT.** As Professor Vivian Bearing, Emma Thompson, confined with terminal cancer to a hospital bed, inhabits numerous flashbacks along with characters from the past. She has been immersed in 17<sup>th</sup> century literature all her life, specializing in John Donne, focused on words used for metaphysical wit. “Nothing but a comma separates life from life everlasting.” She has been a tough lecturer, abusive to students who don’t measure up, and distant with everyone else. Her oncologist, a former student in her class, treats her the same way as she has treated her students – harshly, without feeling, placing research over humanity. No one comes to visit her in the hospital – except in the last scene, when her old professor, who had advised her in the flashbacks to get out of the library and into the real world, pays her a visit just in time to speak from the heart and

soften her passing. Vivian had lost her self, and missed intimacy. At the end, she shares intimacy only with her primary care nurse.

**LAST ORDERS.** With the exception of two scenes in the narrative present – accompanying four men on their way from London to spread Jack’s ashes (Jack is played by Michael Caine), and Jack’s widow Amy (played by Helen Mirren) making a last visit to their retarded, institutionalized daughter, the entire film of “Last Orders” is a compilation of memories of the surviving characters – Jack’s friends, his son, and his wife. The person who died was the glue holding the group together. Memories come laden with secrets. The film unfolds in layers, with flashbacks to savor from different points of view. Intimacy sneaks up on you. Jack’s last orders led the group to a spiritual pilgrimage, and fostered greater intimacy with him (his memory) and with each other.

Without our memories, time does not exist for us. This is demonstrated in the last two film clips.

**AFTER LIFE.** Available in public libraries, this Japanese film is a fantasy narrative in which individuals go after death to a room in After Life, where they are given one week to choose one memory from videotapes of their life that will stay with them forever. A film is made of their memory. The viewing of their film triggers their departure from After Life into another realm of existence. The process of choice is coming to grips with the essential question of identity – taking the measure of our lives. After Life becomes a metaphor for any period of time in our lives – when we have the chance for renewal, resolution, regeneration, self-understanding. Those who cannot choose become workers at other After Life sites. People find meaning in the relationship they have with their interviewer – a last intimacy before all is forgotten except their one memory.

Identify is the offshoot of the inner workings of time and memory. Your lifework is creating your identity.

**SONG FOR MARTIN.** In comparison to “Iris,” another film about Alzheimer’s Disease, there are no flashbacks in the Swedish film, “Song for Martin.” The love affair between Barbara, the first violinist, and Martin, the famous conductor, is part one of the film; the gradual losses after their marriage due to Martin’s Alzheimer’s are part two; and Barbara’s trials as a caregiver are part three. Early key scenes are repeated later in order to show the change in their characters and status of their relationship. The film is organized around Barbara’s refusal to give Martin up to the disease. Inevitably, she separates him from her memories of him as a warm and vital husband: “You don’t have to be anything for me anymore. It’s all there, beloved” – meaning, our love is still there; love is real. “And now you’re setting off on your journey. Always prepared. Just not to live any longer.” She goes back to her role as violinist. Intimacy is embedded in community.

### **FILMS ON AGING: RESOURCE LIST**

Robert handed out the attached list of feature-length films on aging that are available for viewing.

