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Friday April 7th 2017
Grandma (Cert 15)

dir: **Paul Weitz**

Starring: **Lily Tomlin, Julia Garner, Marcia Gay Harden**

Sponsor: **Ann Mallett**

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Synopsis: Los Angeles, the present. After breaking up with Olivia, her partner of four months, feminist poet Elle is surprised by the arrival of her granddaughter Sage. Having fallen pregnant by her shiftless boyfriend Cam, Sage needs \$630 for an abortion scheduled for later that day. She is scared to ask her workaholic mother Judy; but Elle is unable to give her the cash, having just paid off her debts and cut up her credit cards. They approach a number of friends and former lovers for the cash, but without success. Finally they obtain the money from Judy, who comes to the clinic to collect her granddaughter.

It's perhaps damning with faint praise to observe that Paul Weitz is an American rarity in manifesting even a trace of interest in contemporary social ills in a way that suggests genuine engagement rather than triumphant self-congratulation - globalism and corporate indifference towards employees in 2004's *In Good Company*, inequity and inherent classism in US universities in 2013's *Admission*. The conclusions Weitz reaches are tentative and unspecific, but it's refreshing to see, for example, *In Good Company*'s Dennis Quaid weighing up whether to take out a second mortgage to send his daughter to college - the kind of quotidian specifics most Hollywood films pass over.

In interviews, Weitz has said that after directing *Admission* (adapted from the novel by Jean Hanff Korelitz), he was chagrined to realise that while his plays had had female protagonists front and centre, none of his previous films had. Accordingly, *Grandma* elevated Lily Tomlin from *Admission* supporting player to nearly the whole show. Her Elle Reid is an embittered poet once anthologised for her first-wave feminist poetry but now a historical curio. Still reeling from the death of her partner of 38 years, the often abrasive Ekle is forced to dredge up empathy when granddaughter Sage (Julia Garner) needs \$630 for an abortion, a figure that staggers Elle: "Where can you get a reasonably priced abortion these days?" She doesn't have the money, so the two women criss-cross LA to try and raise the sum from past friends and lovers; a tattoo parlour worker (Laverne Cox), a former husband (Sam Elliott), and finally, out of sheer desperation, Sage's mother, and Elle's daughter Judy (Marcia Gay Harden), a type-A corporate harridan.

Sage knows precisely why she needs an abortion, and *Grandma* makes it clear she's going to get it by the film's end. It shouldn't be so surprising for an American movie to let a woman have an abortion without the end of the world ensuing, but it's a rare occurrence; for every *Obvious Child* (2014) there are far more films of the *Juno* or *Knocked Up* (both 2007) variety, in which the possibility is gingerly raised and then rejected. A recent Gallup poll indicated that half the American public is pro-choice which hasn't prevented every Republican candidate from ritually trying to



change what's been the law of the land since 1971. Making a film in which a woman isn't punished for wanting an abortion - indeed, is affirmed - shouldn't be such a big deal but it's comparatively gutsy and right-on.

This unambiguous platform plank helps articulate the generational divide between Elle and Sage. In an attempt to raise money, Elle determines to sell her first-edition copies of *The Feminine Mystique* and other feminist touchstones, only to discover that Sage has no idea who Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir were, and that her books aren't worth the thousands she thought: feminism's pioneers are both literally and figuratively undervalued. Worse, Sage has a regressive sense of self, worrying that she's "a slut". Solidarity must be relearned, especially in a film where all the men are repulsed by the merest mention of abortion or even a vague allusion to menstruation.

Like all Weitz's films, *Grandma* is nothing much of note on a technical level, shot with inelegant hand-held camerawork. Tomlin's character is a slightly more sophisticated variant of the tired 'bad grandma' trope introduced in *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and the film inevitably builds to a series of soft-focus reconciliations, capped with maudlin singer-songwriter balladry. Still, *Grandma*'s rhetorical clarity and unambiguous politics are heartening and bracing, and more moving than the narrative proper.

Credits

Lily Tomlin	Elle Reid
Julia Garner	Sage
Marcia Gay Harden	Judy
Judy Greer	Olivia
Laverne Cox	Deathy
Elizabeth Peña	Cara
Nat Wolff	Cam
Sarah Burns	Protester
Colleen Camp	Bonobo customer
Lauren Tom	Doctor
Judy Geeson	Francesca
Frank Collison	Mike
Sam Elliott	Karl
Writer/Director	Paul Weitz
Director of Photography	Tobias Datum
Editor	Jonathan Corn

Another View

Lily Tomlin's hot streak continues in her golden years as she tackles the titular role in *Grandma* (2015). As Elle Reid, Tomlin is a feisty lesbian matriarch helping her granddaughter collect funds for her impending abortion. Part road movie, part ethics play, all heartwarming comedy, writer-director Paul Weitz (*About a Boy*, *Admission*) brings to the screen another lovely entry in his own body of work that has been centred on the tender ties that bind family and friends together.

In spite of the narrative circumstances, the characters are lovingly drawn, the action is compelling and humour-filled and the film's focus on the contemplation of life's major choices and consequences make *Grandma* a compelling watch. When Elle's teen granddaughter Sage (Julia Garner) shows up unannounced and needing more than \$600 for an abortion, Elle steps up to the plate and the team visit a series of Elle's friends and lovers who may be able to help out. Elle has actively shuttered herself away, physically and emotionally, choosing to play acerbic liberal and alienating others in the process. Sage's arrival signals a thaw, a chance for Elle to reconcile with the relationships she has broken and to bond with Sage over the similar choices she has had to make.

While Tomlin tends to steal every scene she is in with her glib quips and layers upon layers of loaded emotional moments, Garner is game to match her beat for beat. Dancing on the edge of 'whiny teen', Garner stays rooted in Sage's predicament while maintaining a sympathetic position. Together, they're an enticing pair. Divided into chapters, each interaction with someone from Elle's life provides a lesson to be learned, a choice to be mulled over and Sage comes to understand through Elle's experiences that no decision is every easy. Moreover, Weitz has assembled a top-notch supporting cast that help to elevate *Grandma* from plain to perky. Judy Greer, Sam Elliott, Laverne Cox and Marcia Gay Harden shine in their respective roles as ex-girlfriend, ex-boyfriend, tattoo artist mate and daughter. Weitz's script gives each of them enough to work with, to showcase their chops and meaningfully contribute - although Cox is arguably cast in a throwaway role.

In spite of a glowing ensemble, there is something off-centre about the whole affair. While comparisons can be drawn to another hit abortion comedy - *Obvious Child* - *Grandma* seems to use Sage's abortion as a gimmick to draw us into Elle's own drama. There's no clear-cut moral stance drawn on the topic, there is rarely any drawn out or contemplative conversation around it. Rather, Sage's abortion is a plot point without a point. Moreover, Weitz's direction and writing - while maintaining itself as a carefully considered women's film - seems to move at odd paces, forcing viewers to navigate intense emotional peaks with major dips in tempo and tone. Overall, *Grandma* is utterly charming and Lily Tomlin proves that she is still the comic whipper-snapper we have always loved.

Alfie Gemmill (CineVue)

Programme News

Please be aware that the film scheduled for showing on May 5th - **Julietta** - will be shown on Saturday May 6th, starting at 7.30pm. This is because of a University function which requires the use of The Venue.

Membership information

Please remember that the membership list for next season opens on May 1st for the whole of the month. We are also planning a short questionnaire before the end of the season for members to complete, to give us some feedback on the Society. Please look out for this.

Our next screening - Friday April 21st
***Under the Shadow* (UK/Iran 2016. Cert 15)**

UK-based Iranian Babak Anvari won a BAFTA this year for Outstanding Debut by a Writer/Director/Producer in this atmospheric film in Farsi, the UK's entry to the Foreign Language Oscars in 2017. Set in Tehran during the Iran/Iraq war, would-be doctor Shideh finds herself increasingly menaced by a malevolent force that may be an evil spirit, intent on harming her child. With its clever use of the tropes of supernatural cinema in the context of a