

Suburban Families Making Mistakes

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“The Oranges” opens on Friday, October 5 at Landmark Sunshine Cinema, AMC Empire 25, AMC Loews 84th Street 6, and AMC Loews 19th St. East 6.

Running time: 90 minutes; Rated R.

At the heart of “The Oranges” is the middle-aged male fantasy of older man, younger woman. This comedy/drama, however, is less about sex than it is about consequences—especially since the younger woman is the daughter of the older man’s best friend.

The Ostroff and Walling families live across the street from each other in suburban New Jersey. David Walling (Hugh Laurie) and Terry Ostroff (Oliver Platt) go jogging—or at least walking—together every morning, and the parents would say that they have good lives. The children wouldn’t agree. The Ostroffs’ daughter Nina (Leighton Meester) hasn’t been back to visit for five years; and Vanessa Walling (Alia Shawkat) feels stifled by the routine and lack of opportunities in her life, even though she’s been living in her old room since her college graduation. When Nina finally does return for the

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holidays, whatever comfort there was in this stasis goes out the window forever.

Nina has just broken up with her unfaithful fiancé Ethan (Sam Rosen), and everyone hopes that she'll be interested in the Wallings' son Toby (Adam Brody). However, the attraction that actually develops is between Nina and David. After Thanksgiving dinner, Nina seeks out David in the "man cave" where he spends much of his time avoiding his wife Paige (Catherine Keener). They kiss, and the kiss soon leads to more. When the affair is discovered just moments before its planned consummation, it throws both families into chaos.

To their credit, Ian Helfer and Jay Reiss (the writers) and Julian Farino (the director) don't try to make us wholehearted fans of David and Nina. This isn't a movie about love conquering all. The creepiness of the relationship and the pain that the new couple cause their families and former mates aren't glossed over—they drive the film. One of the funniest, scariest, saddest scenes comes when the repressed Paige finally vents her anger on her own Christmas decorations; and the best line in the film comes when Toby claims to be the only man in history "to be cock-blocked by his own father." In the end, however, the trauma of the affair allows the family members to reinvent themselves, and perhaps to come closer to being the people they want to be.

The film does a good job of capturing the claustrophobia of suburban life, and the way a scandal can unfold. No matter where David and Nina go, they inevitably encounter someone embarrassing, from Nina's sharp-tongued mother Carol (Allison Janney) to David's business partner. In fact, one of the things that makes David and Nina sympathetic is their obvious amateurishness at infidelity—it's clear that neither of them has had to sneak around like this before. Even in Atlantic City in the winter, there is always someone who knows them. It's also interesting to watch as the couple's confident façade cracks open and exposes their true feelings—undignified, untidy, and far more real than at the beginning of the film.

"The Oranges" is a solid effort, and there are only a few missteps. It's clear from Nina's first meeting with David that they'll sleep together, for instance. The casting was also a little confusing from a purely physical standpoint, because Alia Shawkat, as David's daughter, more closely resembles Oliver Platt than she does Hugh Laurie. She is also sadly underused—more a spectator of events than involved in them.

Although the entire cast deliver strong performances, Hugh Laurie is the standout. He's mournful and expressive, conveying paragraphs with each twitch of his features, and effortlessly portraying an adult who has decided to behave like a child. As Nina's ex, Sam Rosen does a wonderful small turn as a typical twenty-something douche, making it instantly clear why Nina prefers David. As Nina, Leighton Meester is believable as a young woman who is both sincere and a creator of drama at the same time. Platt, Janney, and Keener are all a treat to watch. Janney is especially good, by turns sarcastic, domineering, and flailing without dignity.

"The Oranges" is funny and moving without being manipulative, and treats the older and younger generations with equal compassion. It's worth seeing.

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About the Author

Ted Rabinowitz is a writer based in New York.

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