

## Great Cast Receives Winning Showcase in Dustin Hoffman's 'Quartet'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are few things more fragile than an actor's ego. It must be treated with the utmost care in order to prevent a split-second meltdown. The enormous pressure of audience expectations coupled with the piercing eye of an ever-present media is enough to send sensitive folk to a sanitarium. Thick skin is a necessity in show business, but what happens when that skin begins to age?

No one knows about this sort of anxiety better than Dustin Hoffman, who memorably witnessed it up close and personal on the set of David O. Russell's gloriously messy satire, "I Heart Huckabees." His screen partner Lily Tomlin delivered her reliable brand of deadpan genius on camera, but behind the scenes, she was an explosive time bomb of insecurity that ended up being immortalized online, courtesy of leaked footage. Her expletive-laden rant at Russell was a potent illustration of an aging icon whose paranoia had caused her to doubt her obvious abilities (though, to be fair, Russell proved to be every bit as unhinged).

The F-bomb is dropped only once in Dustin Hoffman's otherwise warm and cuddly adaptation of Ronald Harwood's play, but it is used for maximum effect. It is placed in the mouth of former opera superstar Jean Horton, a veteran diva not a million miles removed from Tomlin. She's been asked by some old colleagues to reunite in a quartet that will perform at the annual gala concert of their new picturesque abode, Beecham House, a home for aging musicians. Instead of reacting in delight, Horton is deeply offended—convinced that her supposedly backstabbing friends are setting her up for humiliation. This culminates in a classic bit of naughty language, delivered with saucy glee by Maggie Smith, an actress who is surely the grandest of all Dames. Her portrayal of Horton's anguished vulnerability is all the more remarkable considering how far removed it is from her own. For Smith, acting has always seemed as effortless as breathing. From her peerless work in the '50s and '60s, culminating in her brilliant Oscar-winning performance in "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" (a startling inverse of the "Dead Poets Society" formula), to her crowd-pleasing, razor-sharp comic timing in seven consecutive "Harry Potter" films and every episode of "Downton Abbey," Smith has only gotten better with age and shows absolutely no sign of slowing down. If anyone seemed destined for immortality, it's her.



Maggie Smith stars in Dustin Hoffman's Quartet.



Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Hoffman's "Quartet" is worth seeing first and foremost for the pleasure of watching Smith perform alongside a gallery of first-rate character actors. Tom Courtenay has several bittersweet interludes with Smith as her ex-husband whose romantic life never recovered from the breakdown of their marriage. Billy Connolly steals all of his scenes as a tireless ladykiller whose eyes naturally exude unprintable mischief, while Pauline Collins is agreeably dotty as an Edith Bunker-like life force gradually drifting into dementia. One of the film's biggest letdowns is also one of its most inevitable: as formidable as these actors might be, none of them can quite carry a tune. Thus, the picture is one long build-up to a big musical number that remains offscreen, though the ensemble is littered with a gallery of renowned opera stars, all of whom receive special mention during the end credit roll. Yet as anti-climactic as the film's finale may be, it also poignantly reflects the film's overarching message that life is about the journey, not the destination.

Aside from his uncredited work co-directing 1978's crime drama, "Straight Time," "Quartet" marks Hoffman's first time in the director's chair, and he appears to be right at home. He brings a light touch to even the most melodramatic sequences, though he does linger on a few arresting images, such as a sudden stream of petals flowing over a bannister, signaling the imminence of tragedy. What shines through each scene is his genuine compassion for artists, even those whose ego knows no bounds. Perhaps Hoffman's comfortable perch at the top tier of American actors has allowed him to observe his colleagues with an uncommonly clear-eyed gaze. He portrays Horton not as a monster nor as a cartoonish caricature, but merely as a prideful woman privately terrified by her own mortality. She's been on the stage so long that her acting tricks have seeped into her offstage life—she recites planned lines to deliver in the presence of Courtenay as if memorizing a script. It's in her decision to perform with her fellow entertainers that Horton is making her last-ditch effort to embrace life rather than wait around for her final curtain call. It's a triumphant moment, and Smith makes it sing (even if she, alas, does not).



Michael Gambon and Tom Courtenay star in Dustin Hoffman's Quartet.

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The demographic of audiences aged 60 and over is neglected far too often by Hollywood, and "Quartet" is guaranteed to delight those seeking a reprieve from bombastic blockbusters, as well as a pleasing alternative to "Amour," Michael Haneke's infinitely superior yet far more wrenching portrait of old age. Hoffman's film may be no more or less than substantial than Fox Searchlight's geriatric escapist lark, "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel," which transformed India into a playground for crusty Brits (including Smith), yet it's considerably more effective. Hoffman knows that these actors don't need broad gags and contrived hijinks to bring down the house. Sometimes all they need is a well-enunciated F-bomb.

*'Quartet' stars Maggie Smith, Tom Courtenay, Billy Connolly, Pauline Collins, Sheridan Smith and Michael Gambon. It was written by Ronald Harwood and directed by Dustin Hoffman. It opened January 25th at Landmark Century Centre Cinema and Landmark Renaissance Place. It is rated PG-13.*



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [12]

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