

Lily Tomlin Fuels the Journey Depicted in 'Grandma'

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There is a circumstantial and frank presentation of abortion in the new Paul Weitz film “Grandma,” and it probably could not have resulted the way it did if the story wasn’t anchored by the great Lily Tomlin. She portrays the title character, helping her granddaughter get to the procedure.

There are some clunky scenes along the way to the clinic, but the film does point toward the emotional element in the choice women make, above and beyond the abortion “issue.” By using Lily Tomlin’s character – a representative of the 1960s, when abortion was illegal – as a contrast to her granddaughter’s fate, is almost to have the whole history of the debate portrayed. The difference is it’s not done with placards and loudmouths, but through the very human decision that has to be made – difficult, unfortunate and vital to provide. Despite some über surliness by the curmudgeonly drawn Lily character, the humanity on display in the film is important when discussing or debating the hot button topic.

Sage (Julia Garner) is found wandering aimlessly in her grandmother Elle’s (Lily Tomlin) neighborhood. Elle is an academic who published feminist poetry of note in her early career, and is assessing her life months after her same sex life partner has died, and left her to pay off debts that has left little in savings. It is in this scenario that Sage appears on Elle’s doorstep, needing money for an abortion.



Sage (Julia Garner) and Elle (Lily Tomlin) on the Road in 'Grandma'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Elle doesn't have sufficient funds, and Sage is too frightened to go to her mother Judy (Marcia Gay Harden), who Elle birthed with her life partner. So Sage and Elle pile into her antique car to seek out money for the procedure. Along the way they encounter Elle's new girlfriend Olivia (Judy Greer), the cad named Cam (Nat Wolff) who put Sage in her condition and Elle's ex-husband Karl (Sam Elliott), who still has issues of his own.

This is a road trip picture – written and directed by Paul Weitz ("Being Flynn") – and a symbolic one, considering all the life characters that Sage and Elle run into. It doesn't completely work, since Tomlin's character is too reactionary at times, which of course makes her right – or successful, in the case of shaking down Cam – in every encounter. Her character is too broadly drawn, but it doesn't take away from her heroism in doing what's right for Sage. As an ardent feminist lesbian, she's not going to demur to the abortion debate, she simply is going to get Sage to the procedure, since that is the choice.

The supporting cast, with their points-along-the-way symbolism, get short shrift in the character department as well, and become at times as cartoony as the traveling companions in "The Wizard of Oz." Elle's friend is a transgender tattoo artist (Laverne Cox), which was an easy go-to in giving the story "atmosphere" (Elle even stops for a moment to get a tattoo). Most effective is Sam Elliott as Karl, who represents the past – a past that uncomfortably rises to the surface once the real reason for Elle's visit becomes apparent.

The three generations of women, wrestling with the right to choose, are given proper exposition. This is where the issue of abortion comes down to, the street level of what is available to women when they decide to terminate their pregnancy. Elle's daughter Judy finally comes aboard, and although she is a stereotype of the hard-charging lawyer, she does add a buffer zone between the grandmother's experience in the 1960s and Sage's procedure in the now. Judy is almost a relief amid all the drama that preceded her.



Elle and Karl (Sam Elliott) in 'Grandma'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

One of Roger Ebert's Little Movie Glossary Rules makes an appearance – "Whenever a beautiful classic car is introduced at the beginning of a film (in the case of "Grandma," a 1955 Dodge Royal Lancer) that car will be wrecked by the end of it." Well, the car merely breaks down, but it's introduction and use throughout the movie is wacky distraction, and its breakdown serves another bit of struggle in the journey toward the end. Whenever I see a classic car in a film used for a just-to-drive purpose, I always think of Roger.

Despite it's broadness, "Grandma" is a brave and necessary addition to the human discussion of what the abortion decision means to women. And if it has to be caustically brought into a real world scenario for that discussion to continue, there is no better grandma to bring it than Lily Tomlin.

"Grandma" is in select theaters, including Chicago, on August 28th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Lily Tomlin, Sam Elliott, Julia Garner, Marcia Gay Harden, Judy Greer, Elizabeth Peña, Nat Wolff and John Cho. Written and directed by Paul Weitz. Rated "R"



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