

Film Review of *Poms*

By

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“Poms” (2019) is a movie about coming to terms with serious illness, achieving an unfulfilled dream, and forming meaningful relationships with others, old and young. This offbeat comedy/drama from director Zara Hayes and screenwriter Shane Atkinson, stars Diane Keaton as Martha, a frail-looking but strong-willed retiree who has been given a terminal cancer diagnosis.

This film begins with Martha advertising an estate sale of items she has set up an alleyway in the large, unnamed city where she has lived in the same apartment for 46 years. She is relocating to Sun Springs, a retirement community in the state of Georgia. The move is, apparently, part of Martha’s last hurrah. She has no children or other relatives with whom to spend her last days; so, Martha is relocating to a sunny environment to live out the rest of her life among strangers.

If she is hoping to be alone, however, Martha has chosen the wrong setting. From Vicki (played by Celia Weston), the Southern belle head of the retirement community, to Sheryl (played by Jackie Weaver), Martha’s overly friendly sometimes pushy, neighbor, to Officer Karl (played by Bruce McGill), the head of security, someone is always around watching the activities and the comings and goings of the retirees.

After noticing that Martha is trying to hole herself up in her house, Sheryl decides to encourage Martha to be more social. She begins by trying to draw Martha into an illicit poker game at Sheryl’s house next door. Martha declines but then is annoyed at the noise from next door when she is trying to sleep. After Martha complains to Karl about the noise at Sheryl’s house, Sheryl and the other poker players sneak over to Martha’s place to hide from Karl. Along with Sheryl and the other poker players comes Ben, Sheryl’s high school-aged grandson, who secretly lives with Sheryl.

Martha refuses to join the game a second time and goes to bed leaving the poker players to their game in her living room.

Soon after Martha moves in to Sun Springs, Vicki tells Martha that everyone in the retirement community must join at least one club. If members do not find a club they like, they can apply for permission to form a club of their own. Sheryl stops by Martha’s place one afternoon and notices Martha’s old cheerleading outfit in a box in her living room. In a pivotal scene in the movie, Sheryl learns that Martha wanted to be a cheerleader in high school. Martha had done the training to be on her high school cheering squad but decided to drop out of the squad in her senior year to care for her ill mother. So, Martha never got to be a cheerleader in high school. Sheryl views the cheerleading outfit that Martha could have thrown away years before, but did not, as an unfulfilled dream of Martha’s. She tells Martha that it is not too late to realize her dream by starting a cheerleading club at Sun Springs. Sheryl also tells Martha she will help with the club if Martha agrees to teach Ben how to drive. Martha agrees reluctantly and the two set out to find six other women to participate in the new club.

Things do not go smoothly for either Martha or the prospective cheerleading club. After some plot twists and turns, Martha and Sheryl finally end up with a total of eight members. However, except for Martha, the other women interested in the club are klutzes who will need a lot of practice to improve. Martha remembers many of the cheerleading drills she learned in high school and sets out to teach them to the women. Vicki and some of the other members of the application committee try to stop the cheerleading club from forming and, subsequently, from practicing in a building at Sun Springs.

Sheryl, a substitute teacher at Ben's high school, comes up with an alternate plan for a practice venue. Unfortunately, she does not tell Martha and the other women that they will be practicing their routine *after* the high school cheerleaders practice theirs at a school-wide rally. It comes as no surprise to viewers that the older women are rattled and mess up some of the cheers. Cloe, a student in Sheryl's class and a high school cheerleader, captures everything on her cell phone and sends the video to the other girls on her squad. The teenagers think it is amusing that the older women want to be cheerleaders at their ages. Another high school cheerleader sends the video to the internet where it goes viral. The older women are devastated. Sheryl is angry. When Cloe tries to apologize, Sheryl convinces her to coach the women after school so that they can improve their drills.

Cloe agrees reluctantly. Her coaching and the club's hard work pay off when the women enter a cheerleading contest for performers who are 18 years and older. Once the contest organizers find out that the women are much older than 18, they try to disqualify them from participating in the contest based on their ages. Martha argues that the women meet the age criterion of being 18 plus. Officer Karl backs Martha up and implies that police action for age discrimination could follow if the contest organizers prevent the women from performing.

The contest organizers acquiesce. The women's flawless performance on stage stuns both the judges and the audience. Through persistence and hard work, the cheerleading club turns their initial failure into success. They challenge the stereotype about older people "being over the hill" after they retire.

Although this film has gotten mixed reviews in the press because of obscene or profane language and some sexual comments Sheryl makes, both adults and older teens should find "Poms" worth seeing. From a sociologist's perspective, a number of sociologically-relevant qualities are embedded in the plot's twists and turns. First, this film challenges stereotypes about older people on several levels by showing viewers that aging is a normal part of the life cycle. "Poms" makes the point that the interests of retirees, including having close relationships—especially of the women as they bond with each other during cheerleading practices, breaking the rules sometimes, and doing fun things, are not so different from the interests of younger people.

However, the sad reality is that many older people in the U.S. are *not* adequately prepared for outliving their parents and grandparents by decades. As young workers, they look forward to retirement some day and

hope to retire to travel and a leisurely life; but living an independent, healthy life in which retirees make choices about where and how they live is not the case for all older people (See Hannon 2016). Regarding finances in retirement, Josephson (2019) reports statistics that show "around half of American households have no retirement savings at all and, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), around 29% of households age 55 and older have neither retirement savings nor a pension."

Fortunately, Martha seems to have planned sufficiently well for retirement. Unlike Martha, however, many retirees count on Social Security benefits being enough to get them through retirement. However, Social Security was only intended to *supplement* people's monthly incomes from all sources during retirement. Living well as we age requires accumulating enough capital, including savings, investments, and a pension, starting as early as one's 30s.

Second, the socialization process in western societies does *not* prepare people adequately for death and dying. Death is an unknown and people tend to fear the unknown. In traditional societies, people rely on faith, religious affiliation and extended family to help them deal with the unknowns. In contemporary, secularized societies, many fewer people are grounded in faith, religious affiliation/ritual, or strong extended family ties.

Third, like Martha at the beginning of the film, the lack of loved ones and the onset of serious illness can leave older people feeling isolated or detached from others. Even those in good health may think that making new friends later in life is not possible or just too hard. "Poms" contradicts such assumptions by showing that meaningful interaction with others is essential to the quality of our lives *at every age*.

Fourth, the film includes an inter-generational element: Cloe and Ben develop new insights about the older women with whom they interact. After getting to know the women well and coming to care for them, Cloe says that she now has many grandmothers. Early in the film when Martha is teaching Ben to drive, he tells her that his classmates think he is weird because he lives with his grandmother in a retirement community. By the end of the film, Ben realizes his relationship with his grandmother is special because she has taken on the important role of raising him, a role that his parents *should be* playing in his life but are not. As the film progresses, both teens grow as individuals. Ben becomes more confident as he demonstrates his music-mixing skills which provide the background for the

club's performances. Cloe meets the challenges and expectations of her new roles as coach and mentor to the older cheerleaders. The teens' personal relationship also blossoms as they interact with each other to support the women's practices and performances.

"Poms" ends on a positive note, leaving film viewers thinking that people are never too old to be loved and valued and they can fulfill dreams at any age, especially with help and support from friends. Martha fulfills her cheerleading dream before she dies and forms important, sustaining relationships in the process. After she passes, the club continues their cheerleading performances in Martha's memory and to raise awareness about ovarian cancer. Not only has Martha achieved a dream important to her personally but she has also left a legacy for other women at Sun Springs to enjoy.

References

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