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About Schmidt

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About Schmidt

Abstract

This is a review of *About Schmidt* (2002).

Reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* in its portrayal of an aging man grappling with his own mortality, *About Schmidt* confronts the theme of life's meaning straight-on. Further, it emerges with something films rarely offer in this cynical, postmodern era: a message (albeit one that hits with a feather).

Played with subdued charm by Jack Nicholson, Warren Schmidt is an ordinary man newly retired after having worked at an ordinary job for decades. Well-liked by his co-workers, Schmidt has been married to Helen (June Squibb) for forty-two years. The couple's grown daughter, Jeannie (Hope Davis), lives in Denver and is engaged to be married to Randall (Dermot Mulroney), a hapless waterbed salesman who spouts self-help aphorisms and embraces get-rich-quick opportunities at every turn.

Directed by Alexander Payne (*Election*, *Citizen Ruth*), and filmed almost exclusively in Nebraska, the movie opens with a rapidly shifting montage of downtown Omaha, cleverly setting the tone of alienation which makes its presence felt throughout the film. The scene then turns to Schmidt, in his office at 5:00 p.m. on his final day of work as a senior actuarial executive. A lingering high-angle shot of Schmidt appearing alone and dwarfed by his freshly emptied office serves to underscore the film's existential theme. Upon his retirement, Schmidt finds himself not only cast aside in his replacement by a younger man at his company, "Woodmen of the World Insurance Company," but set adrift as he searches for a new mission

in life. Noting the "Schmidt file archives" sitting abandoned in the recycling area outside his old office building, he feels the sting of identification, inconsequentiality.

A man obsessed with wresting meaning from absurdity even as he channel-flips through a sea of vapid infomercials advertising bun tighteners and kitchen gadgets, Schmidt is persuaded to improve a child's life through the organization Childreach. For \$22 a month, he sponsors a six year old Tanzanian boy, Ndugu. Prompted to introduce himself to his new foster-child in writing, Schmidt finds himself baring his soul in his letters, with Ndugu serving as an invisible father-confessor figure to whom he voices his concerns. It is only when Schmidt's wife dies early in the film, however, that he is truly forced to confront the true depths of his tumultuous emotions.

Seized by wanderlust, Schmidt sets off on a road trip of nostalgia and self-discovery en route to his daughter's wedding in Denver. Alone with his thoughts in a 35-foot Winnebago, aptly named 'The Adventurer,' he embarks upon an archetypal quest in the form of a life review. In meditative communion with the starry skies in the forest, Schmidt has an epiphany, and awakens from his night in the wilderness "completely transformed." His new mission: To stop his daughter's upcoming wedding at all costs.

About Schmidt is a film infused with religious rites, figures and symbols. Turning to his church upon his wife's death, Schmidt consults the local minister, who asserts that "God can handle it if we're angry at him." Encapsulating the very essence of the spiritual platitude, Jeannie's fiancé, Randall, joins the chorus. "You'll be in our prayers," he intones, but not before trying to get Schmidt in on the "ground floor" of a pyramid scheme. Faced with such absurdity at every turn, Schmidt delves within for comfort. In his search for purpose, we see his strong spiritual core unfold. In a poignant voice-over, Schmidt explains that, as an actuary, he can "calculate with great probability how long a man will live," and estimates that he has nine years left now that his wife has passed away. "Life is short, Ndugu," he writes in one of his letters, "and I can't afford to waste another minute." In keeping with his old company motto, "as a Woodman clears the way," Warren Schmidt strives to clear a path for a new spiritual and moral life.

Stylistically, this film makes use of a lush visual vocabulary. The preciousness of time is emphasized through lingering close ups on clocks. Further, Biblical allusions abound, such as the address of his childhood home (now a tire store) at 12 Locust Avenue, emblematic of the ravages of the years. Small touches, such as the careful use of sound, silence and musical dissonance elevate this character study to the level of art. *About Schmidt* is a film well worth seeing. Its emotional range is vast, spanning the all too human comedy of manners and the

darkness of loss. Nicholson's performance garnered him an Oscar nomination, and for good reason. In his mastery of film language, Alexander Payne has become a new auteur, and is a director to watch.