



## The Holdovers

Review by Vince LePlavy

With many movies, there's always a sediment of subtext stewing just beneath a layer of visual garnish. Then there are the few that present their message and style as one in the same, unhidden and proud of their conviction. Alexander Payne is a master at producing films that check the box of the latter. From *Sideways* to *The Descendants* to *Nebraska*, the beating heart of his work has always been centered around living breathing people and the situations that are thrust upon them in their respective worlds. With *The Holdovers*, Payne reaches back to character dramas of the 1970's to craft one of his very best films that truly embodies the holiday spirit of old and features Paul Giamatti in a roaring comeback performance that ranks as one of the actor's most memorable roles.

Payne gives us a window into the slice-of-life antics that take place at the prestigious Barton Academy. We focus in on an unlikely trio: an aged and jaded history professor, a heartbroken school cook and an angst-ridden young ne'er-do-well that all spend the two-week Christmas break together within the boundaries of the school grounds. At first it seems as if none of them will survive before break's end. But as the vacation goes on, they all come to learn and respect each other's differences and forge an unlikely bond that affects all three of them. Paul Giamatti will have you crying tears of laughter and sadness as the grizzled Paul Hunham. Not since his previous collaboration with Payne on *Sideways* has Giamatti really leaned into such a deep and affecting character with the ability to change throughout the course of the film. His mannerisms and dialogue are wickedly funny while his physical appearance makes the actor disappear into the role from his bushy whiskey-stained mustache to his all-seeing lazy eye that lays bare any shenanigans his students may attempt within his militant classroom. Da'Vine Joy Randolph (*Dolemite Is My Name*) digs deep as Mary Lamb and delivers a no-nonsense portrayal that doesn't shy away from a good dose of all-too-human apprehension in the face of tragic loss. If justice is done, both Giamatti and Randolph should be awarded Oscar nominations come January. Yet let's not forget first-time actor Dominic Sessa's Angus Tully, the gravitational north star that both Hunham and Lamb orbit around. Sessa really nails a fine balance of shrewd charm and bittersweet innocence that proves he's got more to offer as future acting opportunities will now assuredly be thrown his way.

After seeing the trailer played before the previous summer behemoth *Oppenheimer*, it seemed that *The Holdovers* would fall into the category of "film that happens to take place at Christmas time" as opposed to a full-fledged holiday classic. Boy was I wrong. This is one of the best Christmas movies I've seen in years and with time and acclaim will go on to be a perennial mainstay on family's watchlists around that most wonderful time of year. The biting wintry cold of the northeastern commonwealth of 1970's America is a picturesque backdrop for the snowbound characters and brings to mind a nostalgic Christmas of past where faith, good will and joyful cheer ran abound in towns big and small. When Angus chides on Hunham to chaperone him to a local party taking place on Christmas Eve, the comic factor gets amplified with the juxtaposition of spirits young and old being tested against one another. It's in these interactions that take place outside of the academy, outside of Hunham's zone of comfort, that we witness the Grinch of a man seeing a bit of his icy heart begin to thaw. There are moments in these sequences that may bring a tear to your eye simply for the fact that it captures the spirit of Christmas with such a profound and relatable sense of happiness.

Perhaps the most impressive feat Payne pulls off with this laugh-out-loud heartwarmer is the impeccable sense of time and place. From the scratched look of the film stock to the to-a-tee mise en scène, the period depiction is amazing. This isn't a film that takes place in the 1970's but rather a film that could've been made in the 1970's. From cavernous Barton Academy to the aforementioned neighborly Christmas party to the visual vistas of Boston in wintertime, you can't help but be propelled directly into December 1970. To top it off the soundtrack is outstanding and features a solid array of underrated radio gems mixed with festive holiday renditions that will have you searching for the songs directly after you've seen the movie. Labi Siffre's "Crying Laughing Loving Lying" and Cat Steven's "The Wind" capture the sound of the times and highlight the relationship between teacher and pupil while the Christmas songs invoke a deep sense of hopeful sentiment coupled with wistful longing, particularly Andy William's "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" and a pair of tracks by The Swingle Singers ("Medley: Deck the Halls/What Child is This?" and "White Christmas") With all these unforgettable touches, Payne saves a seat for us in his time machine and we're more than happy to take the ride with him.

When I first saw *The Holdovers*, I was fortunate enough to be invited to an exclusive screening at the American Film Institute Conservatory and attend a Q&A session with none other than Alexander Payne himself. Over the course of an hour, the auteur answered questions of all kinds from AFI fellows within an array of disciplines. Towards the very end with only a few minutes before his departure, he left us with an important piece of inspirational knowledge that he stated he has held on to for as long as he can remember:

*"When it comes down to it, the only things that really matter are the characters and the story."*

With that creative mantra reinforced throughout his entire filmography, Payne knows that those two elements are what truly make a film tick. You may have a sleek-looking car but it can't go anywhere without an engine. With the life-affirming *The Holdovers*, the vehicle is off and running down the snow-covered roads of a feel-good cinematic landscape. You won't forget it.

**Coming to the Historic Bay Theater December 8th**