

Wiener-Dog (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 30 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 4; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities!

All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises...

Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"?

It has already been, in the ages before us.

The people of long ago are not remembered,

nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-5; 11.

I was impressed by writer-director Todd Solondz's 1998 film [Happiness](#), which like his new one, consisted of an ensemble cast in a series of related stories. The unifying factor in his new film is a docile dachshund that passes through the hands of owners who are not dealing well with the difficulties of coping with life. If the people who made *The Secret Life of Pets* had produced this film, the elongated canine would have helped each one deal with their life issue in some clever way.

This however is a Todd Solondz work, a guy who makes the author of *Ecclesiastes* seem like a cockeyed optimist. Judging by the two films that I have seen of his and the numerous articles about him that I have read, I suspect Solondz despises the majority of popular upbeat pap cluttering our cinemplexes.

There are four vignettes in *Winer-dog*, beginning with a child and concluding with an old woman nearing the end of her life. Sandwiched between stories of the early and the last stages of life there is one about a rootless young woman still hopeful, and another about a despised film school teacher harboring false hopes concerning his own script that keeps getting palmed off from one Hollywood agent to another.

In the opening story 9 year-old Remi (Keaton Nigel Cooke) is recovering from cancer, so his father (Tracy Letts) brings home the female puppy to cheer him up. The boy's mother Dina (Julie Delpy) is unhappy because the pup will need to be spayed and house broken. The boy learns a sad life lesson when Dad tells him, "You have to break a dog to break their will." When the boy asks, "What is "a will," exactly, anyway?" he is told, "It's character. It's the thing that makes you you." Mom adds her own cheerful touch when she answers Remi's question about why the dog needs spaying by recounting a lurid tale of a dog "raped"—yes, she uses that term with her 9 year-old son—by a dog named Mohammed. "Mohammed"—wonder whom she will vote for in the 2016 elections? When the dog's digestive track is upset by Remi's feeding it a trail bar, the dog is quickly taken to the vet to be euthanized. Mom is equally incompetent in talking with Remi about death.

However, the dog is saved at the last minute. The kind-hearted veterinarian nurse Dawn (Greta Gerwig), cradling the cuddly pup in her arm, decides to run off with the dog. Meeting former classmate Brandon (Kieran Culkin), she accompanies him on a road trip to visit his brother Tommy (Connor Long) and wife April (Bridget Brown), both of whom have Down Syndrome.

This end of this segment is not conclusive for Dawn, but it is for the mutt, but because of a kind act by her, it is the one upbeat moment in the whole film. Well, no, there is an earlier moment when Remi and his dog play together, ripping up his mom's fancy pillows and feathers fly through the air and coat the carpet.

In the 3rd vignette Danny DeVito is Dave Schmerz, a film professor who gets no respect despite his one script that was actually produced and became a hit. But that was a long time ago. His air-headed students reject his advice about the story being important in a script, and when he can get his agent on the phone, the glib talker shunts him off to another agent, and then to another, and so on. Hospitals are now using dogs to bring comfort and relief to patients, but our little wiener-dog has an impossible job with this owner, especially when a former student who is now hot in Hollywood speaks to an assembly at the school and disparages both his old teacher and the school. Poor Dave—even his last name in German means “pain.”

The last story finds the dog living in a home for the elderly with Nana, an embittered old woman (Ellen Burstyn) nearing the end of her life. Her estranged grand daughter Zoe (Zosia Mamet), coming around with her sour-faced boyfriend Fantasy (Michael James Shaw) who claims to be an artist, is shocked to learn she has given the dog the name “Cancer.” “It felt right – everyone's dying,” is the terse reply. Of course, Zoe is there only to wheedle some money to support her boorish boyfriend. This part ends with Nana's dream about what her life could have been like had she made some different choices. A series of look-alike little girls with red tresses gently rebuke her for neglecting forgiveness and love.

Director Solondz has stated that his film is a bit of “Benji and Au hasard Balthazar.” If so, there is none of the adventure of that 1974 film in which a stray mutt saves two

kids from kidnapers. Little "Cancer" is never mistreated like the little donkey in Robert Bresson's classic film, but he is just as passive. However, no one will think this dachshund is a Christ figure!

The film is very much of a downer, with Solondz, I believe, tweaking the noses of those who read far too much into their one-of-a-kind pets. Think of the endless number of films other than *Benji* in which Lassie, King of the Royal Mounties, or Rin Tin Tin boldly save the day. The director also pokes fun at those ponderous, long spectacles that ape the stage by having an Intermission. This film is just an hour and a half long, and yet there during the Intermission our dachshund waddles through the desert as we hear the jaunty faux-Western song "The Ballad of Wiener-Dog" written by "South Park" composer Marc Shaiman.

This is not a film for everyone, and certainly not if you are looking for an evening of light entertainment! With a scene showing a trail of dog poop scored to "Clair de Lune," it will tax the sensibilities and patience of many viewers, so beware. But for that hardy group of film lovers delighting in off the beaten path cinema, Todd Solondz offers plenty of opportunities to discuss themes of life and death, suburban living, relationships in their death throes (Remi's parents!), the independent film industry and its makers, and end of life regrets—and even the role of pets in our society.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the August issue of VP.