

Please Give

A Review by Tom Sims

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If ever a film captured the essence of the saying “charity begins at home,” it would be “Please Give,” a new offering from writer/director Nicole Holofcener. The film stars Catherine Keener, who appears in much of Holofcener’s work, perhaps most notable her film “Friends with Money.” Keener and co-star Oliver Platt play a New York City couple (Kate and Alex) who own a vintage furniture store. Kate is constantly trying to help the homeless wherever she goes, but (if this is possible to believe) isn’t always good at it. She tries to give a man her leftovers from dinner out as he stands on the sidewalk near a restaurant. He glances at the leftovers and responds “I’m waiting for a table.” Awkward!

Kate is also not very successful at finding a volunteer opportunity despite her trying. She cannot understand why she must maintain an almost Pollyanna approach to the residents of a nursing home. And in one of the most moving scenes in the film (or really any film) she cannot stop crying as she tries to work with mentally challenged young people.

In an attempt to be charitable closer to home, Kate invites her elderly next door neighbor and her two granddaughters to dinner. Kate and Alex have already purchased the elderly neighbor’s apartment with plans to expand their own when she dies. This makes for tense moments during the dinner party to be sure. The grandmother and one granddaughter are despicable creatures almost beyond belief, but the other granddaughter, Rebecca, is a gentle soul (played masterfully by Rebecca Hall—probably best known as the lead in Woody Allen’s “Vicky Cristina Barcelona”).

This has got to be one of the most subtle films I’ve ever seen. Beautifully written and each role brilliantly acted, it gently leads you through the lives of richly developed characters who almost perfectly relate to one another. I’m not sure how convinced I am of a particular subplot affair between Alex and Rebecca’s sister, but despite that this film shines.

And the one actor that particularly shines is Sarah Steele, who plays Kate and Alex’s daughter Abby. Her performance is flawless as a teen most definitely with angst. In one scene of unsuccessful philanthropy, Kate attempts to hand a homeless person a twenty dollar bill. Abby grabs the bill before it reaches the guy’s hand essentially saying, “No way, I’m taking this.”

“Please Give” is one of those rare gems that you need to put some effort into finding. It’s been released through Sony’s independent film distributor, Sony Picture Classics, so you may not find it at a theater near you, but you will want to seek it out this truly inspired film!