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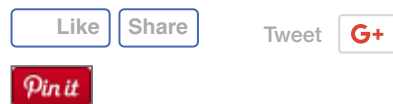


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Film Review: Youth

An arty, self-indulgent ramble through the insults of old age starring screen stalwarts Michael Caine and Harvey Keitel, and buoyed by the gorgeous lensing of Luca Bigazzi of 'The Great Beauty.'

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/term/93) Dec 2, 2015



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From Paolo Sorrentino, director of *The Great Beauty* (winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign-Language Film), comes a meditation on aging and mortality that's at once visually stunning and a candidate for the season's most irritating and pretentious work. In many respects, *Youth* extends the concerns of *The Great Beauty*, as if Jep ("We're all on the brink of despair") Gambardella, its 65-year-old hero, had aged 15 years and landed as a geezer in the current film. In lieu of story or narrative, Sorrentino goes with a series of off-kilter images and oddball vignettes in no discernible order, perhaps reflecting the characters' addled minds. And perhaps this gallimaufry could only have found distribution—by Fox Searchlight yet, which rarely misses the mark—because, though in English, it wears the colors of European art film and is therefore *profound*.

Fred Ballinger (Michael Caine) and Mick Boyle (Harvey Keitel) are two old friends who are taking the waters—along with less pleasant treatments—at a Swiss spa. Fred, a retired conductor/composer, is getting badgered by an emissary for the Queen to play a concert of his celebrated "Simple Songs."

He repeatedly refuses—"for personal reasons." Mick, an acclaimed filmmaker, is on the verge of shooting his magnum opus, though of what it consists is never made clear—echoing the thematic and narrative murk of the film he's appearing in.

Around them swirl other guests at the spa, including Lena (Rachel Weisz, beautiful and underused), Fred's daughter and assistant—and the girlfriend of Mick's feckless son—and Jimmy (Paul Dano), a young actor who's famous for playing a robot in a blockbuster (think *Birdman*) and wears a permanent seen-it-all smirk, the way only Dano can. In a cameo, pop singer Paloma Faith plays herself, complete with a comic music-video parody of "Can't Rely on You."

Somewhere in the final third, Brenda Morel (Jane Fonda), a Hollywood star, explodes on the scene to grandly announce that she's quitting Fred's film, which is a piece of crap, and that by leveling with him she's saving his reputation. The makeup artist who had her/his way with Fonda has turned the ever-appealing actress into a gorgon with a botched face job. (One can only speculate that Fonda submitted to this due to the dearth of juicy roles for older women, and the lure of a character who is at least proactive and gives Mick the what-for.)

The dialogue between Fred and Mick revolves around peeing and memory loss. The second act slouches toward a climax of sorts when Lena comes down on her father with that old canard, "You gave everything to your music and ignored the family." Yeah, yeah. Then, the supreme outrage, she accuses Pops of falling in love with a man. Spliced among the shots of liver-spotted hands, slack skin, wooden chompers like George Washington's and other gifts of old age are moments of sly humor. Two termagants in wheelchairs collide in a corridor. Fred and Mick keep up a funny riff on their past lust for one Gilda Black, Fred regretting that he never scored, while Mike can't remember whether he himself did. Fred's old music chops kick in as he conducts a chorus of cows in a pasture.

Lensed by the superb Luca Bigazzi (of *The Great Beauty*), the film is visually ravishing, offering shots of Alpine meadows laced with wildflowers—the Bernese Oberland?—and surreal images of empty rocking chairs rocking, and guests lined up like week-old sardines beside a pool, or lurking like lost souls in a steam bath. This is definitely decrepitude, one-percenter-style. *Youth* might also qualify as the year's most phallogentric film, an exploration of *male* aging, Fonda's cameo notwithstanding. Making a bid for most poignant moment is a shot of Fred and Mick in a pool mooning up at a naked Miss Universe and thinking: Nevermore. At one point, Fred gazes from his balcony over the Alpine beauty and wonders out loud, "What the hell am I doing here?" The audience may wonder the same.

Click [here \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3312830/?ref=fn_al_tt_1\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3312830/?ref=fn_al_tt_1) for cast and crew information.

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