

The Holdovers

Director: Alexander Payne

Country: USA

Date: 2023

A review by Peter Debruge for *Variety*:

We've all seen our share of stories about inspirational teachers. "The Holdovers" is dedicated to the opposite sort: a hard-ass named Paul Hunham whom everyone hates. The feeling is mutual, as Mr. Hunham considers most of the kids enrolled at Barton Academy to be entitled little monsters, and the administration to be even more corrupt. Judging by the evidence director Alexander Payne provides, Mr. Hunham's not wrong. But he is uncharitable, and on that count, the movie couldn't be more different: It's a generous drama about three wounded souls stranded at Barton over Christmas break, during which this coldhearted boarding school Scrooge gets a welcome chance to thaw.

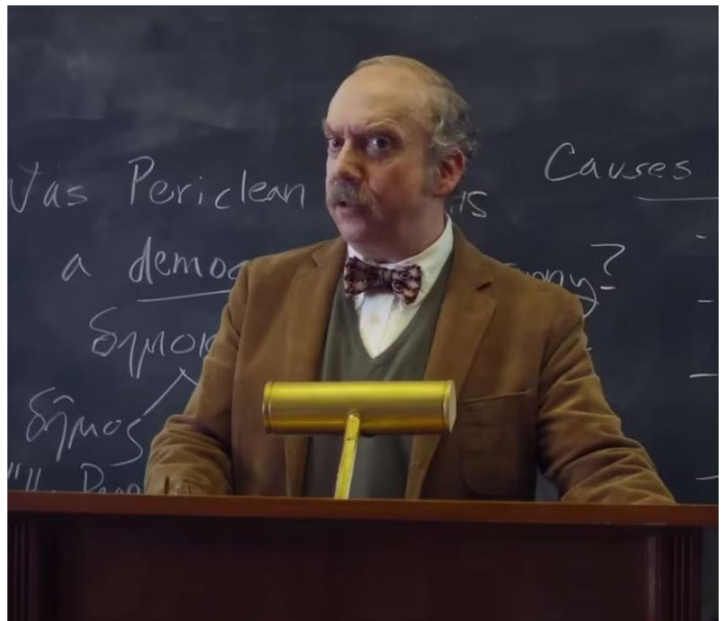
The year is 1970, but "The Holdovers" is not your typical period movie. Instead, it feels as if Payne (a heroic film preservation advocate) unearthed this vintage artifact from the era in which it takes place. From the old-school MPAA rating to the stylized treatments of the Focus Features and Miramax logos, plus strategically deployed zooms and a faux-celluloid filter applied in post, "The Holdovers" could pass for a lost Hal Ashby movie, circa "The Landlord," right down to the character-focused, socially conscious way Payne and screenwriter David Hemingson go about telling the story.

But that story is just a delivery device for something altogether deeper and more humane.

Peer beyond the perfectly satisfying Christmas-movie surface, and "The Holdovers" is a film about class and race, grief and resentment, opportunity and entitlement. It's that rare exception to the oft-heard complaint that "they don't make 'em like they used to." The most obvious giveaway that the movie was actually made in the 21st century is the presence of Paul Giamatti, slightly more grizzled than we last saw him, reunited with the helmer who gave him his greatest role, as the curmudgeonly Miles in 2004's "Sideways."

Hunham shares many of Miles', er, qualities: cynicism and frustration, coupled with a Tourette-like tendency to lash out at those of which he's either jealous or judgmental. He's also got alcohol problems, and in this case, eyes that point in different directions (a detail that could have seemed cruel, but is handled with the right mix of empathy and humor). There's a bit of Ignatius J. Reilly to Hunham — or "Mr. Walle" to his students, who trash-talk the taskmaster for his unfortunate ocular condition and the rotten-fish smell they associate with him — though he's gainfully employed at a post far beneath his intellect. Hunham should be teaching the classics at an Ivy League school, instead of ancient history to ungrateful teens.

An early scene shows Hunham handing graded final exams back to his students, whom he refers to as "vulgar little Philistines" and "reprobates." Most of them get D's and F's. One boy, a pompous rich kid planning to spend his holidays in St. Kitts, manages to score a B+. This is Angus Tully (newcomer Dominic Sessa, who suggests a young Adam Driver), who teases one of the classmates condemned to



spend Christmas at Barton. No one wants this sentence, which is akin to being orphaned — and worse, means being monitored at every moment by Mr. Hunham.

Normally “holdover” duty would fall to one of Hunham’s colleagues, but the headmaster (Andrew Garman) wants to punish Hunham for flunking a legacy student the semester before. A graduate of Barton himself, Hunham has an entirely too rigorous set of expectations for the kids who pass through its halls today, fueled by what may well be a desire to see them do better than he has with his life. There’s a lot of self-hatred buried deep in the character, and excavating that is one of the many levels on which the movie succeeds. But more important is the dynamic between him and the other Christmas detainees.

At first, he’s tasked with minding four boys unable to go home for the break. Then Angus’ mother calls and cancels their plans for St. Kitts. Suddenly, this brat is stuck doing time alongside the twerp he’d tormented — but not for long. Through a last-minute adjustment, the group shrinks to just Mr. Hunham, Angus and kitchen manager Mary (Da’Vine Joy Randolph), who’s coping with the first Christmas without her son, Curtis, a graduate of Barton who was killed in Vietnam. Incidentally, Barton men almost never enlist. Their rich parents can usually pull strings, getting them placed in fancy universities. But Curtis didn’t have the resources for that. And neither, we learn in time, did Paul Hunham.



As Payne’s fans will recall, the satirist’s second feature, “Election,” also took place in high school. His worldview seems to have mellowed since, in a positive sense, which isn’t a knock against the mocking sting of his earlier work so much as an appreciation of the way he’s now able to put flawed characters in amusing situations, without rigging the laughs at their expense. Hunham demonstrates a formidable wit, launching into unsolicited anecdotes about ancient Rome and quoting Latin his listeners don’t have the capacity to translate. He’s also wicked enough to extemporaneously lob Armando Iannucci-caliber insults at those he resents.

Hunham doesn’t seem to realize that impressionable adolescents should be treated with, well, kid gloves. Luckily, Mary’s there to remind him, serving as both comedic relief and the film’s emotional core as Hunham slowly comes to acknowledge that he’s taking his own disappointments out on Angus. As contemporary character actors go, no one does consternation better than Giamatti. But it’s more than just shtick here. Hunham wears his misanthropy like a kind of armor, and true to its early-’70s influences, “The Holdovers” takes the time to chip away at that shell, revealing the personal details that explain so much of his and Angus’ psychology. Meanwhile, Sessa holds his own opposite Giamatti, coming across like a young Adam Driver: tall and gangly, with sharp features, and the capacity to suggest wells of emotional turmoil beneath the surface.

Payne teases several romantic subplots, flirting with the possibility of taking manipulative shortcuts — tricks that would’ve been surefire ways to wrench tears from his audience — but wisely steers the focus back to his characters and the work they still need to do on themselves. It would’ve been too easy to tug the standard hero-teacher heartstring, though there’s no question that Hunham learns as much from the holiday as his student does. In the end, rather than serving up another “Goodbye, Mr. Chips,” Payne pioneers a more original “Goodbye, Mr. Chip on His Shoulder.”

From: <https://variety.com/2023/film/reviews/the-holdovers-review-alexander-payne-paul-giamatti-1235709680/>