



The life of Riley
Director: Alain Resnais
Country: France
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A review by Chuck Bowen for *SlantMagazine.com*:

In the tradition of many of Alain Resnais's films, *Life of Riley* follows characters who attempt to explicate their lives through art, only to find the art in question to be a slippery portal into introspective chaos. It's essentially a comedy, as the existential terror that informed politically and morally unnerving films like *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Muriel* gradually evolved, over the years, into a kind of authorial wryness that affectionately revealed in characters' simultaneous (and largely implicative) gestures of defeat and forgiveness. The surprisingly deep comic generosity of the great director's late films springs from a notion of looking oneself in the metaphoric mirror and, finally, being old and settled enough to see that face for what it was and is: the form of an everyday person beholden to the petty trivialities that grip almost all of us who're lucky enough to live in some incarnation of the first world.



Life of Riley often behaves like an unofficial stripped-down sequel to the director's *You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet*. As in that film, a death (which, in this case, is forthcoming) sends the characters spiralling into riffs on the past that are informed by their highly theatrical background, which spins them, and the viewer, into the position of occasionally being unable to discern reality from fiction.

George Riley, an unseen man dying of cancer, is a ghost before death, as he obviously embodies a youthful exuberance that was abandoned by the protagonists for the reassurance of day-to-day stability. Jack (Michel Vuillermoz) is a wealthy businessman who respects and envies George's teaching as well as his patronage of the arts. Jack's wife, Tamara (Caroline Sihol), has a thing for George that's colored by her disappointment in Jack's amusingly out-in-the-open infidelities. Colin (Hippolyte Girardot) is a doctor so hopelessly drab and conformist that he renders Jack a dynamo by comparison, a failing that Colin's wife, Kathryn (Sabine Azéma), notices all too well. Occasionally interrupting this chummy foursome's sonata of doubt and sexual/social resentment is George's not-quite-ex-wife, Monica (Sandrine Kiberlain), and her new lover, Simeon (André Dussollier).

Based on the play by Alan Ayckbourn, a regular Resnais collaborator, and populated by a variety of faces familiar to contemporary French cinema (including Resnais's), *Life of Riley* confidently evokes an aura of hermetic self-regard. It's clear that these characters have been stewing in one another's respective juices for far too long and have grown bored, complacent, and sort of casually, comfortably hopeless. They're even performing in a local play together (except, tellingly, for Jack), which lends them the occasional opportunity to express their real desires in the "safe" context of fiction. In the film's greatest scene, Tamara runs through her lines with Jack, which are so wonderfully elastic as to comment perfectly on two ironically opposing sources of sexual tension: in the play, a woman is questioning a young man about his sexual inexperience; in the life of the film, Tamara's grilling Jack about her status in relation to that of his prominent young lover's.

A less inventive director could probably get by on the self-reflexive dimensions of the dialogue alone, but Resnais emphasizes a series of visual planes that deepen the evolving emotional stakes of the wordplay. Your awareness is always directed toward the film's stage as being composed of a highly differentiated foreground, background, as well as a variety of middle grounds in between. Complicating the matter of the play-within-the-narrative is the high theatricality of life as rendered outside of the play, as the settings are all obviously stages with backgrounds that include curtains that have been painted in fluorescent colours with bold outlining inks that suggest a *Peanuts* comic strip. The dimensions of these backgrounds are seemingly expanded by the contrast offered from the real props in the middle ground, which are positioned so as to render the sets nearly three-dimensional. The characters are often placed in the upper foreground, and are often blocked in pointedly symmetrical two-shots so as to establish its comparative flatness to the background. This flatness is accentuated even further by purposefully mismatching close-ups of the actors' faces that are set against a differing backdrop that suggests denim fabric that's been painted in crisscrossed black-and-white squares.

The sets are an inventively succinct encapsulation of Resnais's career-long theme of time as a realm that's ungovernable by human measurement, as they subtly insist that the past and present occupy the same space at the same time. When Jack and Tamara run lines, they walk from the background to the foreground through a tunnel of bright red roses that serves as a through line from one dimension to another. It's as if they're taking a time machine to revisit their initial flush of infatuation with each other, traveling the film's entire space in a symbolic flight through history. A similar effect occurs at the end of the film when Colin pleads to Kathryn to stay with him, as she ascends a flight of stairs, seemingly ready to abandon Colin, until he displays the courage to reach a figurative hand toward their relationship's potential salvation. It's a bold gesture that embodies Resnais's casually worn humanity. *Life of Riley*, his overpoweringly beautiful final film, looks ever onward, daring to push through the ghosts that inhabit the present, standing between the pessimism of an ill-spent past and the optimism of an undefined future.



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