

March 2, 2007

MOVIE REVIEW | 'TWO WEEKS'

## Lessons in Surviving a Mother's Dying Days

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

In the deathbed drama [“Two Weeks.”](#) [Sally Field](#) creates an agonizing portrait of Anita Bergman, a middle-aged American everywoman in the final stages of ovarian cancer. As her four children and their families descend on the home in North Carolina that she shares with her second husband, Jim (James Murtaugh), the movie squarely confronts the physical realities of dying.

Anita repeatedly vomits in bed. When her intestines become blocked, she chews her food and spits it out. Expected to die in three days, she lingers on for two harrowing weeks, drifting in and out of consciousness, moaning and hallucinating from the morphine, her mouth hanging open, as her children take turns standing watch. Even in the calm interludes when Anita is relatively pain free, dread and hard-bitten courage wage a fierce war on her stricken, haggard face.

**Ms. Field's tough, accurate performance is all the more compelling for its understatement.** Not for a moment do you feel she is playing to the gallery. This character would never get up onstage and bleat, “You like me, you really like me.”

**The movie gets many other details right:** hospice care, the calls to funeral homes, the awkward distribution of possessions, the final farewells to family and friends and the long-seething sibling resentments that surface when major decisions have to be made quickly.

The first film written and directed by Steve Stockman, “Two Weeks” is clearly inspired by personal experience. His remarks in the production notes state that his own mother died at home with the whole family present. In many ways “Two Weeks” is a knowing cinematic primer on what to expect when a parent dies. I should add, however, that it presents the best possible scenario of an extremely painful rite of passage. Final exits are often much messier than this well-ordered departure carried out with minimal tears and no permanent fractures of family solidarity.

“Two Weeks” gets into serious trouble in its clumsy attempts to offset the sadness and anxiety with humor. This pursuit of sitcom levity contaminates a movie that **might have been an American answer to the hardheaded Romanian masterpiece “The Death of Mr. Lazarescu,”** in which a man's life slips away inside a bureaucratic medical jungle.

The biggest of many missteps is a visit from an assistant rabbi (the family is partly Jewish) who stands over Anita and bellows that she's looking great and soon she'll be better. A visit to the bank to close Anita's account using her forged signature is coyly depicted as a mock robbery, with the children wearing

dark glasses and arriving in a “getaway car.”

A connective device — clips from an interview videotaped by her oldest son, Keith ([Ben Chaplin](#)), at an earlier stage in her illness — becomes an increasingly forced attempt to flesh out Anita’s biography. At one point in his interrogation he asks her which of her children she has loved the most.

Almost to the end of the film Keith, a Hollywood writer, recovering alcoholic and student of Zen, speaks in glib wisecracks that help him maintain a defensive distance from his deeper sense of helplessness.

Barry (Tom Cavanagh), the middle son, is a go-getting executive who was the most responsible of the three brothers growing up, and Mr. Cavanagh gives him a chilly yuppie gloss. The spoiled baby of the family, Matthew (Glenn Howerton), is the sketchiest character, and his selfish, angry wife, Katrina (Clea Duvall), whom they all loathe, is the movie’s designated baddie.

The most endearing sibling is Anita’s only daughter, Emily ([Julianne Nicholson](#)), who was 14 when Anita divorced her first husband and made the girl her confidante. Ms. Nicholson imbues Emily with a stubborn integrity. When she meets her brothers at the airport, she arrives armed with a library of how-to books about death and dying.

Skulking through the house is Jim, who bitterly resents his stepchildren’s taking over the home in which he has lived with Anita for 13 years. Because he is not their father (who, strangely, never appears or is heard from), they barely give him the time of day. Not nearly enough attention is paid to this friction. The portrait of grown children stampeding through the old homestead as though it belonged to them is the movie’s most unsettling emotional undercurrent.

“Two Weeks” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has a couple of off-color remarks and stark images of illness.

## TWO WEEKS

Opens today in Manhattan.

Written and directed by Steve Stockman; director of photography, Stephen Kazmierski; edited by Debra Chiate; music by Heitor Pereira; production designer, David Donley; produced by Mr. Stockman and John Marias; released by Custom Productions Inc. and Transcendent LLC. At the Regal Cinemas Union Square, 1 Union Square, at 14th Street. Running time: 102 minutes.

WITH: [Sally Field](#) (Anita Bergman), [Ben Chaplin](#) (Keith Bergman), Tom Cavanagh (Barry Bergman), [Julianne Nicholson](#) (Emily Bergman), Clea Duvall (Katrina), James Murtaugh (Jim Cranston) and Glenn Howerton (Matthew Bergman).

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)



when the four siblings lose the battle to maintain a grim face, as when a clueless part-time rabbi drops in to give an unconscious Field a voluminous pep talk.

The script sustains a scrupulous honesty for most of the way, marred somewhat by the stock denouement. For all the vomiting and the runny noses, "Two Weeks" feels a little too cozy to fully pass muster as art. It strokes, holds our hands and tells us it's OK to laugh, rather like all those self-help books Nicholson insists on quoting from.

Copyright 2007 Newsday Inc.