

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).

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am New York

## A tough, sad journey taken with a smile

BY JAN STUART

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March 2, 2007

Writer-director Steve Stockman has made **an agreeable movie about a disagreeable death.**

We've been down this sad road before, the one that leads into a suburban neighborhood where four grown siblings gather at the home of their cancer-ridden mother to see her through her final days. There is the breadwinner (Tom Cavanagh), the addict artiste (Ben Chaplin), the angry problem child (Glenn Howerton) with the wife from hell, and the nurturing sister who preaches wisdom from books on death and dying (Julianne Nicholson). Then there is Mom, quirkily cast with a feel-good star (Sally Field) in the hope that audiences will overcome their queasiness about the subject matter and make the journey.

Mom is an organizer/controller of the first order, having pre-written her obit and pre-assigned dibs on the antique clocks and kitsch furniture ("This is going to be worth something someday") to her kids and cipher second husband (James Murtaugh). She reminisces about the past in video-diary monologues delivered to Chaplin's inquiring camera; the anecdotes are amusingly banal but tend to come across as acting ops. Field is never less than technically accomplished, but you always see the gears grinding. She also looks far too vigorous for someone diminished by cancer, a deficit that cannot be smoothed over by having a character remark upon it.

**Where Stockman is on firmer ground is in locating that discomfiting threshold where the clinical intensity of a grueling death spills into the absurd.** The film's best parts are given over to those awful/funny moments

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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.

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**SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER**[http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/movies/305696\\_weeks02q.html](http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/movies/305696_weeks02q.html)**Note the restraint in 'Two Weeks'***Friday, March 2, 2007***By SEAN AXMAKER**  
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

There's nothing neat or dignified about dying in Steve Stockman's semi-autobiographical "Two Weeks," a drama about the grown children of a tenacious middle-age mom (Sally Field) who gather during the final stages of her terminal ovarian cancer. It's messy and painful, eased only the admirable modesty of Stockman's writing and direction.

Mom is all determined resilience, trying to hang on long enough to say goodbye to her grown children and young grandchildren while she has the strength and presence of mind to do so. No silently suffering saint, Field offers a performance of pragmatic perseverance laid low by a body shutting down on her.

Daughter Emily (Julianne Nicholson) takes on the weight of care responsibilities with a humorless resolve while her big brothers (Ben Chaplin and Thomas Cavanagh) quickly descend into sardonic humor, less old childhood patterns than a front to keep the intensity of their feelings at bay. Stockman uses the gallows humor to ease the tensions with laughter, but never at the expense of the ordeal.

"Two Weeks" skirts the usual clichés and avoids the obligatory teary emotional confrontations (well, not completely, but it is refreshingly underplayed). Stockman focuses on the minor conflicts that flare between siblings and in-laws in close quarters, letting us piece together the big picture -- from Mom's maverick past to the sibling tensions around the youngest brother (Glenn Howerton) -- from his well-observed puzzle pieces.

It's often too well-ordered and restrained, with Stockman cheating his way out of the messy chaos by keeping the spouses and little kids conveniently out of the house and sweeping that layer of stress off screen. But the understatement of the awkward family dynamics and complex feelings -- fear and anger, grief and guilt, and especially helplessness -- has a quiet honesty and unsentimental dignity of its own.

© 1998-2007 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer***MOVIE REVIEW**  
**TWO WEEKS****DIRECTOR:** Steve Stockman**CAST:** Sally Field, Ben Chaplin, Thomas Cavanagh, Julianne Nicholson**RUNNING TIME:** 102 minutes**RATING:** R for language,  
including some sexual references**GRADE:** B-

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### TWO WEEKS

Rated:R

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They said *M\*A\*S\*H* wouldn't work on TV--that you couldn't mix comedy with people dying. Eleven seasons and countless Emmys later, who had the last laugh?

I watched a DVD screener of this indie first feature as soon as I could get one, which was some days after it had debuted Dec. 1 at one theatre in Los Angeles. After taking time to gather my thoughts and ideas, I went to look up some production background and in doing so wandered into a handful of reviews--all of them, remarkably, mostly negative. But **Two Weeks works.** **And you don't even need a dying mother to appreciate it.**

This semiautobiographical comedy-drama from TV-commercials director Steve Stockman--whose own mother had died of cancer seven years earlier--finds adult siblings who've gathered at their North Carolina childhood home, where mom Anita Bergman (Sally Field)--a non-religious Jew in a nicely un-clichéd modern South--is terminal. Neither superhumanly stoic nor bathed in bathos, she's trying to face her imminent death as practically as possible. This means, among other things, sitting still for her eldest son, Keith (Ben Chaplin), a filmmaker, as he Q&As her about family history for video and posterity.

By either coincidence or design, these naturally TV-dimension segments are black-bordered within the widescreen movie, like a memorial foreshadowed. Field, in these videos-within-the-movie, is not a revelation, in the sense that anyone who's seen her from *Norma Rae* to *Not Without My Daughter*, or even from the dead-on questing youthfulness of TV's "The Flying Nun" to her frighteningly in-and-out lucidity as a mentally ill mother on "ER," knows what a prodigious if underappreciated and underutilized talent she is. Staged before the cancer begins its worst, most wracking toll--smartly providing us buoyant respites from an otherwise grinding downward march to death--these segments in their simplicity give you **renewed respect for her unmannered artfulness.**

Dutiful daughter Emily (Julianne Nicholson) has been shouldering most of the burden until her siblings arrive. Self-consciously mature, she projects the minor arrogance that a sole sister with three brothers has had to develop in order to not to be smothered and to be heard, and writer-director Stockman wisely lets her performance and not the script spell that out. Besides Keith, she's joined by San Francisco suit-of-some-sort Barry (Tom Cavanagh, showing an impressive range beyond his variously cuddly TV types and without becoming a yuppie cliché) and 27-year-old youngest brother Matthew (Glenn Howerton), whose horrible, self-centered wife (the usually better Clea DuVall) has no depth as scripted or acted.

That and a comically oblivious assistant rabbi/former Navy chaplain are the only real misfires in a **smoothly directed story that shows without sentiment how life, for better or worse, goes on.** Official clerks, authority-abusing airline employees and Barry's bosses at work don't necessarily care that your mother is dying and that you're trying to do the right thing. And jokes do get told and meals still get eaten and even the walking dead can laugh as well as

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cry in pain. It's not an easy balance, either in life or on screen. And yes, granted, seeing it in 32 inches diagonal isn't the same as seeing it in a theatre, but camera angles and cuts are the same no matter what, and emotions this big don't shrink. *Two Weeks* deserves a long life.

Critic: Frank Lovece

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