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When Blurry Lines Divide Fact, Fiction and Family

By MANOHLA DARGIS

The strange and delightful "Talent Given Us" is a movie that shouldn't work but does rather remarkably. Directed, written and shot by Andrew Wagner, the film hinges on a retired late-middle-aged couple, Allen and Judith, who spontaneously decide to drive from New York to Los Angeles to visit their son, Andrew. The couple's adult daughters, Maggie and Emily, go along for the ride and for much of the journey squawk in the back seat like unruly teenagers. That's no surprise because Maggie and Emily actually are Allen and Judith's daughters, their real-life daughters.

And the guy behind the camera? The one dogging the couple while they shop at the Fairway Market, pad around their large Upper West Side apartment and swap a litany of minor complaints? The guy who silently rides shotgun in the family van during this uncommon road movie, who records Maggie and Emily's intimate hotel-room conversations and shoots a tentative, tender love scene between Allen and Judith with the camera all but jostling for space on the bed? That's Allen and Judith's son, the one meant to be in Los Angeles, the director Andrew Wagner.

Set at the crossroads of real life and make-believe, "[The Talent Given Us](#)" features people who may be playing fictional versions of themselves, or not. So is it live or is it Memorex? Does it matter? Fiction films routinely borrow tropes from documentaries, including hand-held camerawork, artless (naturalistic) performances and soundtracks without the usual musical cues. Every so often a documentary does the same, and the upshot is fiction films that look like documentaries, and documentaries that play like fiction. Indeed, in films by [Christopher Guest](#) (the fictional "[Best in Show](#)") and [Errol Morris](#) (the documentary "[The Thin Blue Line](#)") such genre ambiguity comes across as organic, as part of a larger drift toward hybridization in which orchestrated reality television isn't an oxymoron.

Although such blurring between fiction and nonfiction may seem new, with "The Talent Given Us," Mr. Wagner is following in the footsteps of such dissimilar filmmakers as [Andy Warhol](#), who excelled at genre ambiguity, and Jim McBride, whose 1967 fiction film "[David Holzman's Diary](#)" centers on a man who puts himself in front of a camera because, as [Jean-Luc Godard](#) said, cinema is truth 24 times a second. Putting aside the inconvenient fact that video is not film (Mr. Wagner shot his movie with a digital-video camera) there remains the larger, thornier question of whether the truth exists before you start shooting with any camera, a question that doesn't become easier once you press the start button.

One of the pleasures of "The Talent Given Us" is that it provokes such intellectual noodling. Are Allen and Judith playing themselves or are they riffing on their own personas? Are these on-screen characters less flattering versions of the real Allen and Judith or are they more idealized? Certainly the on-screen Allen and Judith come across as engagingly if at times maddeningly real, like people you know (like parents, like you). Judith relishes doing the New York Times crossword puzzle, though she regularly leans on Allen to fill in the blanks. Allen, in turn, shambles around the Upper West Side much like every other older middle-aged white man shambling about that neighborhood, a man as at

ease in his own skin as he is in this cloistered pocket.

A lot happens in "The Talent Given Us," even if it sometimes feels as if nothing is happening at all. Emily, a hilariously archetypal actress, regales her captive audience with squirmingly personal details about her sex life, her psychotherapy and her plans for plastic surgery. Maggie drives the van under the judgmental gaze of her father, a scene that plays true to the everyday power struggles not only between children and parents, but also between men and women. State lines are crossed, and stomach-turning fast food is consumed. Road movies are movies of revelation, and as the miles rack up, old wounds are opened and dug into with gusto. Then a beautiful, buxom interloper enters the fray and makes everything that much more complicated (and funny).

In time, the travelers reach Los Angeles, that emerald city at the end of the asphalt road. By then, the questions about truth versus fiction that swirled throughout "The Talent Given Us" have receded into the background, replaced by flesh-and-blood characters as richly conceived as those in any novel.

Indeed, there is a distinct Philip Roth cast to Allen, a man who, in spite of the sordid revelations about his past behavior, retains a core dignity and mystery. And, yes, Allen and Judith do catch up with their son, our director. Andrew Wagner is only on screen for a brief spell, but of course he's been there all along - blowing kisses and raspberries in what turns out to be a very sly valentine to an amazing family.

The Talent Given Us

Opens today in Manhattan.

Written, produced and directed by Andrew Wagner; director of photography, Mr. Wagner; edited by Terri Breed; music by David Dyas. At the Angelika Film Center, Mercer and Houston Streets, Greenwich Village. Running time: 97 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Judy Wagner (Judy), Allen Wagner (Allen), Emily Wagner (Emily), Maggie Wagner (Maggie), Judy Dixon (Bumby), Billy Wirth (Billy) and Andrew Wagner (Andrew).