

Andrew Wagner directed, wrote and shot "The Talent Given Us," coming to the Sag Harbor Cinema on September 9.

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The Wagners Take a Long, Strange Trip

By Mary Cummings

There is perhaps no stranger odyssey in fact or fiction than the one the Wagner family sets off on in "The Talent Given Us."

In this road trip/family reunion/confessional comedy, directed, written and shot by Andrew Wagner and coming to the Sag Harbor Cinema on September 9, Allen and Judy Wagner, 70-year-old retirees, leave New York in an SUV with their two adult daughters in the back seat, headed for California to sort things out with their estranged son, Andrew. In the course of this very long trip, there is not only ample time but considerable enthusiasm for dredging up every uncomfortable truth and festering resentment that has ever plagued a family such as the Wagners (assuming another such family could be found anywhere).

Too flawed, too smart, too honest and too fundamentally subversive to buy into the American familial ideal, these Wagners are also apparently too bonded and too steeped in the culture to abandon all hope

of achieving it—even this late in the game.

At first glimpse, Allen and Judy appear ordinary enough, as they are seen spending the uneventful day preceding their sudden departure amidst the comfy, well-worn

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trappings of their Upper West Side apartment. There is barely a hint, as they shuffle around exchanging offhand comments on Judy's crossword puzzle, of the confrontations to come during the long bumpy journey ahead. But if audiences experience a certain voyeuristic frisson as they look in on this scene of apparent domestic banality, it is because they know that in this, his mostly—but not entirely—scripted debut feature

film, Andrew Wagner has cast his own family to play versions of themselves.

Allen and Judy are the filmmaker's real-life parents. Maggie and Emily are his real-life sisters. The friends who turn up later on—Billy Worth and Judy Dixon—play themselves, and Andrew is the son on the opposite coast whose uncommunicative behavior will prompt the Wagners to leave the next day on their bizarre cross-country odyssey.

The winner of several film festival awards and highly praised at Sundance in 2005, "The Talent Given Us" is still being distributed by Andrew Wagner himself, despite an avalanche of critical acclaim as it travels the hard way from theater to theater. Hailed by Roger Ebert as "one of the most original, daring, intriguing and honest films of the year," it was called "breathtaking" in Newsday, and "strange and delightful" in The New York Times.

Its ambiguous genre—somewhere

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between make-believe and raw truth—is probably what makes it a hard sell in a mainstream market that clings to the conviction that only stars and explosions sell tickets. The unsurprising irony is that it is that very ambiguity that the critics have found so engaging.

Because, visually, the movie plays like an ungussied though hardly amateurish documentary, audiences are in a constant state of uncertainty over whether Allen and Judy are really playing their real selves. Was Allen really the wastrel womanizer Judy says he was? Would Judy really want to be rid of him? Is Emily really possessed by LA flakiness and therapy-induced delusions, and are both she and Maggie as desperately unattached as the versions of themselves they are portraying?

The first thing to remember is that both daughters are professional actors. (If Emily looks familiar, it is probably because of her long-running role as Doris, the paramedic, on ER.) The second thing to keep in mind is that the acting talent given the daughters was almost certainly nature's gift, a genetic inheritance. As critic Ella Taylor noted, "acting talent among the Wagners is not confined to those who have made a career of it, but it's equally clear that none of them had to look far afield for source material."

It is Andrew Wagner's special talent to have nudged his family along, to have given them the guidance and encouragement they needed to dig deep for some inner truth, bring it to the surface, and pursue it right out to the edge. Judy rages over her husband's past philandering and speaks with frank chagrin of his current impotence. Allen feigns—or reveals—an irritating there-she-goes-again indifference. Emily shares squirm-inducing details about her current sex life and insists that her parents confront the parenting failures that have put her in the state that she's in.

Interspersed between these intense, very loud, and frequently very funny emotional outbursts are pauses to indulge in the disgusting fast-food pigouts and oohing and aahing over scenery that are the bane and boon, respectively, of the cross-country road trip. There are also periodic breaks for wacky exercise sessions orchestrated by Judy, a full-throttle convert to the body- and health-conscious narcissism of Hollywood.

One of the pleasures of all this, as

many critics have mentioned, is the intellectual speculation it prompts concerning the nature of truth and the blurry border that separates it from fiction. In a recent telephone interview, Andrew Wagner acknowledged that by putting his family in his movie he had, in a way, invited audiences to "look behind the film" and speculate on how closely the versions presented on screen resemble the authentic originals. He was distressed, he said, by a recent review in which the writer assumed that his movie was inspired by reality TV.

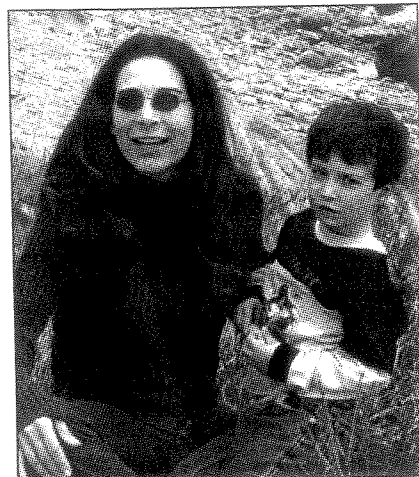
"That was the farthest thing from the truth," he said, stressing that the script had existed before he ever thought of casting his family as players. First came the story, he said, and then came the idea to have them "play themselves in a film about marriage and family ... to use the personal as a way toward the universal."

In retrospect, given the praise the elder Wagners have garnered for their performances, casting them in the movie was a brilliant move. (Judy got two standing ovations at Michael Moore's 2005 Traverse City Film Festival, where the movie won the Best First Feature award.)

In fact, it wasn't that simple. "You always hope for the best in a creative endeavor," said their son, carefully, "but without expectations. You have to court the unknown. That's what gives vitality to the work." The trick, he said, is to remain open, to let things happen.

There was, of course, no reason to doubt his sisters' acting abilities. Like Emily, Maggie Wagner is a seasoned professional, with more than 25 film credits along with New York stage and regional theater roles. Andrew's good friend Billy Wirth is also a successful actor, having co-starred alongside Sidney Poitier, Bonnie Bedelia and Forrest Whitaker, among others.

The intriguing thing about this impressive cast is that the connections between them go way back. Even more intriguing for local audiences is the nature of those connections. According to Alicia Galernt, a part-time Southampton resident whose company, Noble Entertainment, manages performing artists and who is helping to promote "The Talent Given Us," everyone involved in the film, including herself, "has known each other for 20 or 30 years." When they first met, she was spending her summers in the Hamptons, where Andrew Wagner and Billy Wirth were also regulars.



Alicia Galernt and son, Isalah.

In a telephone interview, she said that she could hardly remember a time when Andrew wasn't making movies and recruiting her to be in them. "He's a very passionate guy," she said, "and no one was going to tell him he was not going to succeed."

Because his father "was always doing nutty things financially," the Wagners' summer housing situation was usually iffy, she said "so Andrew would be at our house or Billy's house or Doug Harmon's. All the parents loved him, so he was in and out of all the houses."

Not really comfortable in front of a camera, Ms. Galernt opted for a career that takes her behind the scenes. Billy Wirth became an actor, as did the Wagner sisters, and Doug Harmon, who now has a home in Amagansett, went on to a successful real estate career in New York. Andrew did what they all knew he would do. He made movies, and when "The Talent Given Us" impressed them all as the brilliant work they had been expecting him to produce, they went to work. Billy Wirth, who has a house in Quogue now, joined the cast with the Wagners. Ms. Galernt put her marketing forces at Andrew's disposal. Doug Harmon helped out financially.

"Everyone sort of came to pitch in," said Ms. Galernt.

The movie will be opening in nine cities simultaneously on September 9 as part of a deal with Landmark Theatres. Ms. Galernt has invited Allen and Judy Wagner to Southampton for the Sag Harbor opening and is hopeful that at least some of the others will be able to join them. Everyone has been working so hard to spread the word about Andrew's film, said Ms. Galernt, "It would be so nice to have everybody here where we could relax together."