

Meet the parents

Andrew Wagner makes his mom and dad stars in *The Talent Given Us*

By Darren D'Addario

They don't have lithe bodies, luxuriant hair and luscious lips like Brad and Angelina, but Upper West Side septuagenarians Allen and Judy Wagner are nonetheless one of this summer's most intriguing screen couples. In the oddly touching drama *The Talent Given Us*, a Sundance favorite directed by their son, Andrew Wagner, the nontrained actors play fictionalized versions of themselves: endearing, bickering Manhattan spouses who try to rekindle their cooled marriage while taking a cross-country trip to find their estranged filmmaker son.

Sitting in an uptown café one recent afternoon, the retirees—he had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, she edited medical journals after raising three kids—discuss their unexpected star turns. After (correctly) pointing out that she's more attractive than her dowdy doppelgänger in the film, Judy recalls her son asking them to headline his \$30,000 debut. "We didn't want to do it at first," she says. "We'd never done anything like this before, and the humor is a little dark for me. But I think it reaches a lot of emotional truth."

The 37-day shoot was particularly hard on Allen, who's health has declined over the past decade. (His speech is slurred and he has little control of facial movements, which may be the result of a mini-stroke or dystonia.) But despite his impairments, Allen and his wife often disagree with one another without missing a beat, the way that only old couples can.

"We looked inside of ourselves and we found a talent that we didn't know was there, and we

became artists," she says.

"We have?" he asks, chomping on a straw.

"Well, maybe you didn't, but I did."



SENIORS' MOMENT Allen and Judy Wagner bring a lifetime of experience to their debut movie roles.

Andrew, 42, was trained as a filmmaker at NYU and AFI, before becoming a public-school teacher in South Central Los Angeles.

"Mom asked, 'Who wants to look at my fat face for two hours?'" Andrew Wagner says.

In addition to his parents, he cast his sisters (professional actors Emily and Maggie Wagner), his parents' friends and even his former teachers from Manhattan's Collegiate prep school. But he initially had concerns about his folks playing themselves. "It came to me while I was lying in bed late one night, though I wasn't sure about it at first," the director

says from his L.A. home. "But every time I pictured the film in my head, I always saw their faces, their idiosyncrasies, their afflictions. I just had this very strong intuition that they could do it. As a filmmaker, you come to believe in things that other people won't believe in, because the whole creative life is such a long shot anyhow. But when I first asked them, my mom said, 'I'm not gonna do this. Who wants to look at my fat face for two hours?'"

Judy was eventually persuaded by the rare opportunity to spend significant time with all her grown children, and also by the desire to satisfy long-dormant creative aspirations. A dancer at Bennington College, she did what was expected of women in the early '60s and became a homemaker instead of pursuing the arts. But when she and Allen are asked if they would consider acting again if another director offered them roles, they have one of their typical disagreements.

"They better hurry up before we get dementia," Allen says. "We probably already have dementia."

"Maybe you do," his wife corrects him, "but I don't."

Having previously traveled to Sundance and CineVegas to support the film, Allen and Judy are playing host to their children and other cast members, who are sleeping on air mattresses in their West End Avenue apartment, as the feature prepares for its local opening. The lifelong New Yorkers are reluctantly making plans to

Reviews

Me and You and Everyone We Know

Dir. Miranda July. 2005. R. 90mins.

July, John Hawkes, Miles Thompson.

Miranda July's first feature (after several years' worth of media art) walks a precarious line of Sundance-approved quirkiness and uninflected humanism. But walk it it does, and well. Though shot in Los Angeles, the unnamed setting is as tonally distant as imaginable from the middle-class milieu offered in similarly structured roundelays by Robert Altman (*Short Cuts*) and Paul Thomas Anderson (*Magnolia*). July's characters—primarily a gentle shoe salesman (Hawkes, of TV's *Deadwood*) shell-shocked by his wife's departure, and a desperately lonely video artist (the director herself)—occasionally feel like writerly constructs, as do certain narrative neatnesses. Nevertheless, the pull of the characterizations is undeniable, and July has clearly learned (as not every media-star-turned-filmmaker does) how to direct actors.

That pays particular dividends with regards to her younger performers, who make up one of the most impressive ensembles of American child actors in years. Peter (Thompson) and Robby (Brandon Ratcliff) are sons of the shoe salesman; the former eases into sexual experimentation with two adolescent girls who insist on offering him a blow job (which he is to grade comparatively); the latter, age seven, also eases into sexual experimentation, but via a pre-natural talent for instant-messaging. Both Thompson and Ratcliff turn in deep, internalized work, as does young Charlie Westerman as an intense neighbor hoarding kitchen appliances for her "hope chest." Almost single-handedly, the kids save the film from a fate worse than death: forced indie naïveté. (Opens Fri, IFC Center.)—Joshua Rothkopf



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The Talent Given Us opens Friday 17 at the Angelika.