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The Talent Given Us

A Daddy W Prods. presentation. Produced, directed, written by Andrew Wagner.

Judy - Judy Wagner
Allen - Allen Wagner
Emily - Emily Wagner
Maggie - Maggie Wagner
Bumby - Judy Dixon
Billy - Billy Wirth

By [SCOTT FOUNDAS](#)

Uncommonly confessional and perceptive, Andrew Wagner's debut feature, "The Talent Given Us," dives into a murky abyss of anger, depression and long-festering family secrets only to emerge refreshed and renewed. Brutally truthful, funny and touching in nearly equal measure, this semi-autobiographical, micro-budget road movie lacks any of the obvious bells and whistles that even indie features seem to need nowadays in order to garner a toehold in the marketplace. But strong word-of-mouth stemming from fest appearances should help convince distributors Wagner's "Talent" (which copped the Grand Jury Prize at Cinevegas) is worth betting on.

Not unlike the collaborations of Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman, "The Talent Given Us" is neither total fiction nor total fact, exerting an intrinsically voyeuristic is-it-or-isn't-it pull as it goes.

When elderly retirees Allen and Judy Wagner (the director's real-life parents, playing versions of themselves, like everyone else in the film) decide it's been too long since they've seen their L.A.-based screenwriter son, Andrew, they impulsively hit the road, setting out from Manhattan in an SUV, with their two grown daughters (Maggie and Emily Wagner) in tow.

Quickly, the journey evolves into a form of family counseling -- docile Maggie and brash, body-obsessed Emily dredging up buried childhood traumas, while Judy comes to speak openly about the rigors of maintaining a marriage. Passing through Iowa, they stop to pick up family friend Bumby (Judy Dixon), who's just been fired from her job as a unit publicist on the movie "Field of Dreams 2."

"The Talent Given Us" draws on the notion that a forced reunion like the one depicted here might heal old wounds and allow everybody to live happily ever after. The strength of Wagner's film is that it at once acknowledges the universal appeal of the idea while refusing to buy into it. So, as it road-trips along, with the requisite stops at roadside motels and diners, "Talent" becomes less about its characters attaining some mythical closure than about people realizing the destructive ways they obsess over unattainable ideals of perfection.

There's a refreshing frankness and lack of sensationalism in the pic, particularly concerning sexual relations between older folks. Wagner's parents are in their 70s,

and their bodies have seen better days, but they do not envision themselves as significantly different people than they were when they were healthier and younger; neither, as he turns his camera upon them, does Wagner.

While Dixon and Wagner's sisters are professional actors, his parents are not. Yet, they more than hold their own in their screen debuts, never seeming intimidated by pic's improvisational structure or by the emotionally sensitive nature of certain scenes. Allen Wagner, in particular, commands the film with his hulking physicality and gruff, sandpapery voice, sharing one marvelous scene with Dixon that should rank among the screen's tenderest, most knowing depictions of near-adultery.

Wagner's handheld shooting is fleet and sure-footed throughout, making good use of pic's real locations and in no way seeming hampered by minimal production values. Likewise, Terri Breed's editing keeps things apace.

Camera (color, DV), Wagner; editor, Terri Breed; music, David Dyas; associate producer/sound, Tommy Hines. Reviewed at Cinevegas Film Festival (Jackpot Premieres), June 15, 2004. (Also in Dances With Films.) Running time: 98 MIN.

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