

The Savages

The Savages, John and Wendy. What a provocative surname. The title alone sets in motion thoughts and questions about human nature and what might be savage within us. *The Savages* is the second feature film written and directed by Tamara Jenkins. Released in 2007, it had been a nine year hiatus since her first feature, the dark comedy, *The Slums of Beverly Hills*. Featured are tremendous performances by Laura Linney, as Wendy Savage, Philip Seymour Hoffman as her brother, John, and Philip Bosco as their estranged and deteriorating father, Lenny Savage.

In preparing this talk I wondered how to approach this film. Critics have called this a coming-of-middle-age story. One could certainly talk about the struggle through such a later life phase of development that the siblings, John and Wendy, are facing, maybe for the first time, consciously. However, this fact would be much too literal to be of service to what interests me about this film, which is to wonder about our own savage natures, something this film addresses in a subtle and sophisticated way. As I continued to ponder the film, allowing myself to associate to its many elements, I suddenly recalled another set of siblings named John and Wendy, namely John and Wendy Darling, from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. The more I have reflected on the film and this association, the more closely I see the two relating. If *Peter Pan* is a dream, then *The Savages* is a stark nightmare. But more on that later.

The film begins in the retirement community of Sun City, Arizona. The song playing in the background reflects the optimism from much earlier days, while we have shots of retirees performing a chorus-line dance that might have been a showgirl spectacle during that earlier era. The camera takes us into a home; we see a photo of Lenny Savage and his girlfriend, Dorris, from a happy day of playing golf. But this nostalgic and idyllic mood abruptly ends as we are introduced to Lenny Savage in the middle of a dispute with his girlfriend's personal care worker. We can imagine that this is an old dispute as the worker is reminding Lenny that he works for Dorris; we hear the well practiced contempt as the worker insists Lenny must flush his own toilet, while Lenny screams back that he is eating and does not want to be interrupted. In his youth, Lenny might have sought triumph in assaulting this man, but in his early demented and deteriorating state, he must submit, acting out his aggression by shamefully smearing feces and writing the word 'prick'. Of course it is this event, with the death of Lenny's girlfriend, that leads to

the unexpected family reunion this film documents.

Next we are introduced to the first Savage child, Wendy. She considers herself a playwright, but her reality is a temp position in some anonymous company where she seems to act out feelings against this corporate authority by stealing office supplies. While preparing a covering letter to submit with her play, she reveals a glimpse of her chronological past when she notes the character in her autobiographical play has been abandoned by the abusive father and depressive mother. We also discover that she is a temp in her romantic life, her lover a married man in her building. Having heard the first call about her father, she pushes away her lover, Larry, by lying about an iffy pap smear, and later during intercourse she seems to be relating more to Marley the dog than to her partner.

John is asleep when we first see him, woken by Wendy's hysterical call, his sleep an apt metaphor for his engagement with life. As a professor of drama, he does not participate on stage, and is only able to reflect on what he sees. His interest in Brecht is a further removal, for, as he notes later, in typical drama "there's emotion, an interest in what people are feeling. Whereas Brecht wants people to think.". The fact that he is interested in the theater of social unrest only thinly disguises a deep unrest within him. Wendy wants to engage him, needs to engage him, "Do not leave me alone with this. ... We're going to have to do something, it's a crisis.". John can still fend off Wendy's initial hysteria. He reassures her he is not abandoning her, he is simply going back to sleep. Then Dorris dies.

When I recently read the opening chapters of *Peter Pan*, I was struck by the idealism that permeated the story. One can argue that John and, particularly, Wendy Darling are at the very end of their childhood, soon faced with a harsher existence and responsibilities of adolescence then adulthood. Clearly *Peter Pan*, the *Lost Boys*, and *Neverland* are a metaphor for the wish to forever stay a child in the beautiful child's world, where the children are inherently sweet. However, the initial chapters of Barrie's novel speak to ideal parents who have protected their children from hardship so that the children would have this idyllic existence from which they would never wish to leave, never to grow old. In fact, the only parental sin is that they abandon their children for a few hours in the evening to attend a neighbor's party. *Neverland*, what a darling existence!

As the Savages are reunited in Arizona, their words and interactions quickly lead us to suspect

that their childhood was true to their surname. When John and Wendy meet at the airport, they fall into a well known and rehearsed mutual bickering, more comfortable with each other within this antagonistic relating than either of them is with their lover. In fact, it is John and Wendy that are the old couple, as if married decades to each other, and like such couples they have evolved in reaction to each other as well as to the world around them. Wendy is very close to the immediacy of her affect, always responding to every passion that may swell within her. She is so beholden to this more instinctual life that she constantly tries to change the real world into something that can enable her fantasies. John has a far better grasp of the facts of the real world; not only does he have a grasp of the facts, he has such a stranglehold that he seems to have killed off any passion that might be called an emotional life save his area of study which is contained in academic intellectualism. Together there is the semblance of being able to manage the entirety of daily human experience, but of course it is a facade for it is really two children making due when there is nowhere to turn except toward each other.

Each of the Savage children is critical of the other for their approach to this crisis, and probably numerous situations prior to this. Wendy criticizes John for his unwillingness to commit to his girlfriend and his affectless demeanor despite the obvious impending loss. John, in turn, wants to shut down Wendy's flurry of feelings and her unwillingness to face the facts when he says "We're not in therapy, we're in real life.". What neither of them can admit as they reunite, is how much they actually depend on each other. In fact, one can easily declare that their mutual critical attitude toward the other is a defense against the very real dependency they experienced toward each other in the face of aggressive and abandoning parents.

The time in Arizona is more a challenge for Wendy; John is able to focus on what needs to be done, just the facts, and as usual push the emotions aside. I suspect Wendy is quite challenged when Dorris' family notes "We love Lenny. He's been like family to us.". Though I imagine that statement is simply a platitude as they can barely wait to be rid of him, it also resonates with Wendy's wish for the nice family. Later, she packs her fathers things for the move to Buffalo, rummaging through a drawer of memorabilia alien to her; she doesn't know what to keep and what to throw out. In the hotel room later, on the phone with John, she attempts to imagine warm connections to the articles, but John remembers

that his braces, symbolizing parental care, were removed by pissed off orthodontist when Lenny would not pay the bills. Picking up her father to go to the airport, the kind nurse provides adult diapers, and along with Lenny dropping his pants in the middle of the airplane to reveal the same diapers, Wendy is constantly assaulted by the realities not part of the script of life she is always attempting to write.

Though ultimately the focus of the film is around the Savage children, I would like to comment briefly on Lenny Savage, and address the issue of his dementia. Certainly Philip Bosco puts on a stunning performance to the point that one could use the film to teach about various aspects of dementia (I partly diagnose a Parkinson's related dementia). However, in my view the dementia represents a castration, with the sense that the Lenny in the film is an enfeebled and emasculated version of the brute with whom John and Wendy grew up. Sometimes the personality change that occurs in dementia is toward a much more aggressive individual, but in this case there is the sense an overall viciousness and callousness has been reduced to brief outbursts of frustration. Still, in instances where Lenny explodes at his children - as they first lay eyes on him in the hospital in Arizona and he wants to be untied, or later in the coffee shop as they anxiously ask about his funeral wishes - John and Wendy are unable to respond, and as children might, they just take in the unprocessed aggression. We do learn about Lenny's origins as he "hosts" the film night and confuses the action on the screen with his own upbringing, cursing at a long dead but internalized father who beat him mercilessly. This scene of course foreshadows one of the final scenes of the film when Wendy is preparing the production of her autobiographical play.

As the film shifts to Buffalo, we are introduced more thoroughly to John's world, and thus his character. His house is chaos, though he insists there is "a system", a reflection of his internal state. His system of valuing intellect over emotion, of taking on every conflict in an overly rational, matter-of-fact style might resemble a healthy practicality, but actually hides an emotional chaos that he must deny but from which he still suffers significantly. It is revealed that he is on Zocor, for high cholesterol, which symbolizes his lack of self care. During the brief appearance of Kasha, just before she returns to Poland because John will not commit to her, she reveals to Wendy, "...he won't commit to me, but when I cook him eggs he cries." John wants care, wants love, yet the need to deny such needs compels him to ultimately reject such desires, and those people that would freely offer him warmth. This, of course, is

the repetition compulsion that recreates his childhood, where he (and Wendy) needed the parental care to thrive, but it was not to be had. Not only does this inform how John relates to Kasha, but it also helps explain his interaction with Wendy. She too can offer plenty of emotion, which would include love and tenderness, but her emotion is childlike, unable to contain anxieties, and John is compelled to reject her, dismiss her, or care for her, none of which allows him to address his needs.

I noted earlier how John and Wendy resemble an old married couple which arose out of their mutual dependence as children facing abuse, neglect, and abandonment. An amusing scene wonderfully echoes this history, even exposing a warmth which, while not substituting for the required parental nurturing, is genuine. After John has been injured and is tied to the contraption for his neck, there is a real moment of warm humor between the siblings. Wendy makes tuna melts, a meal a child might master, which they gladly share. They also share Dorris' pain medication which Wendy stole; in learning of the petty theft it seems as if John is about to introduce the parental admonition, but instead he gladly accepts the pill, as a child might, and in the next scene he is driving, high from the medication, actually passionately singing along to a Brecht operetta. At the dementia support group they can suffer the humiliation from the leader's scolding together. John even gives voice to the fantasy that the child couple could flourish when he suggests Wendy stay and they form their "own little write's colony", producing their own children of literary and dramatic works.

In the "contraption" scene there is also a breakdown of warmth and antagonism is sparked as their conversation shifts to the father. This symbolizes why the child couple is doomed to fail, because there is no internal loving and nurturing object on which to build, so as to evolve into a healthy adult capable of both relating to the external reality and to a rich internal emotional life. The Darling children are able to thrive in their adventures with Peter Pan, survive the evil Captain Hook, because they contain their ideal parents within them. In fact, they can and need to leave Neverland, where children remain children forever, because of their love for their parents and their parents' love for them. Again, John and Wendy of this film do not have the advantage of their Darling counterparts for what they have inside is much more savage.

The most obvious internal thorn is the anger and guilt. Wendy's reaction to leaving her father at

The Valley View the first time is, "we are horrible, horrible people". She is preconsciously aware of her wish to banish her father to hell; her guilt is a reaction to her internalized anger, and does not take into account the stark realities of the immediate situation. Of course John's experience of anger is only mediated through facts as he attempts to deny his rage and guilt. He states, "We're doing the right thing. We're taking more care of the old man than he ever did of us". (Ironically, juxtaposed to his statement is the Greenhill Manor promotion, "What do you do when the parent who took care of you can no longer care for themselves?").

John and Wendy also suffer a long history of fear, which I feel is displayed in the scene where they discuss Lenny's wishes for the end of his life. Because of their own unconscious anger, and fear of retaliation, they are very uncomfortable talking about his death to him. Their anxiety is not unwarranted for Lenny does react as if attacked when he barks, "Pull the plug!" and then "Bury me!". You can see both of them wince at the very familiar paternal fierceness. As an aside, it is interesting to wonder if Lenny's anger in this moment is also an expression of his guilt, almost permitting his children to metaphorically kill him and then forget him. However, they cannot bury their internal object; they have already tried.

Shame is the other great weight they have carried since their youth, examples repeatedly appearing throughout the film, such as on the airplane. Most poignantly the shame appears in the movie night scene. When Lenny confuses the film with his life, and has his very public outburst among his peers we sense the Savage's shame as they try to quiet him. But their shame is deepened when a character from Lenny's favorite film is putting on black-face. Of course John tries to manage the shame intellectually, explaining their feelings by speaking of the context of the film as being from a different time, their father's time; however, he could just as easily be trying to rationalize his father's violence, his complete disregard for others including his children, as more common in an earlier era.

The reunification of the Savage children with their estranged father is the stress that reawakens the wished-to-be-forgotten past, and is also an experience that can overwhelm defenses and set the stage for change. For positive change to occur, the characters must avoid regressing too much, and avoid reestablishing the well used defense mechanisms; they must find something healthy that can take root

internally. This aspect of the struggle is more explicit in the case of Wendy as she must learn give up her fantasy of being able to create an idealistic existence so she can be open to a very real life that has much to offer her. The first example of an overwhelming assault against her unhealthy wishes comes from John after the attempt to have Lenny accepted at Greenhill Manor, where she was caught trying to manipulate reality. He questions, "Why are you wasting your time on fantasies?". He explains how the home masks the same thing she would like to ignore when he says, "Right inside that beautiful building right now, it's a fucking horror show! And all this wellness propaganda and the landscaping, it's just there to obscure the miserable fact that people die! And death is gaseous and gruesome and it's filled with shit and piss and rotten stink!" Wendy puts an interesting twist on the idea of an affair when she abandons the child-couple through Larry's arrival, and tries to blame her dissatisfaction on Larry's mid-life crisis. He provides the second assault: "...you insult me by telling me I'm the one having the mid-life crisis here, when you're the one having the affair with the married guy instead of seeking real intimacy with someone who is available for real commitment. And you know it's about your father."

A third assault is when she angrily seeks the missing red pillow, finds it and rips it from the arms of the woman who was enjoying its comforts. She believes she can make things peaceful with her father via the pillow, but he rejects her, harshly. The final assault is John exposing her lie about the Gugenheim grant. She must admit that her ability to survive financially is because of FEMA and 9/11; she is a temp, not a playwright, as far as her funding is concerned.

Wendy also has the fortune of encountering Jimmy, who becomes an essential catalyst for her eventual growth; I maintain that he does not cause her to change, but that her interaction with him allows the good and healthy within her, typically obscured by her passions or beaten back by her conflicts, to coalesce and eventually serve as a foundation for a better future. He makes real a good object within her. When they meet outside the Valley View he provides for her needs without asking by offering a cigarette and tissue. He explains how he cares for Lenny; maybe she is able to care a little less? He is able to listen to her, and she reveals herself to him in a genuine manner, able to note how she temps, along with her vision to be a playwright. He describes how the toes curl down before someone dies, and that she has time, which for Wendy provides a needed step to accepting the inevitable loss. And Jimmy

communicates care for Wendy in wanting to read her play, and in a later scene recognizing that her script was sad. When she hysterically kisses him he rejects her as he must do, but warmly, with love.

Before I turn to John, I make a quick comment about the cat, who in my mind might represent another child, the Micheal Darling, if we stay with the Peter Pan analogy. When Lenny's death is imminent the first to react is Gengis, who leaves Lenny's side, fights with the other resident cat, and hides. Might we not imagine that a little boy could do the same?

John's struggle is less obvious to us, the viewer, compared to his sister's, more implied and internal. However the moment where there is a true shift within him is wonderfully represented in the classroom scene. As the scene begins he is explaining Brecht, his substitute for a healthy paternal ideal, to the students. Though amongst other people, these same students, he has his back turned to them, disconnected and in his own milieu. The phone call notifying him about his father's impending death symbolizes the jolt that could lead to his transformation. It has made him turn toward other people (again, the students) clearly overwhelmed by emotion, not the thinking he idealizes. When one of the students asks him a question, he has no words. He cannot yet speak the language of feelings. I also postulate that Wendy is the necessary figure for John in a similar way that Jimmy is that figure for her. If not for Wendy, John would have handled the whole situation with his father in a well rehearsed, practical manner. Wendy is the needed thorn in his side. He needs her to be fully confronted by the situation, to have access to his own emotional life, which is his only hope to evolve.

At this point I wish to return to wondering what this film tells us about the savagery within us. Peter Pan is an idealistic fantasy where being a child forever is full of fun adventure. At worst John and Wendy Darling are hesitating on the doorstep to adulthood, but though they are separated from their parents physically, the idealistically good parent is within them, which allows them to survive their struggles, give up on childhood, and return to a loving future. John and Wendy Savage have no ideal parent to internalize, and we see how they are adults only as a side-effect of chronologic time, and in the timelessness of their inner worlds they are trapped in their nightmarish Neverland. Because there is no warm and loving figure in their childhood, their own possibilities for healthy affection, nurturing, and self love are severely strangled; there is little within them to mitigate their aggressive instincts. Wendy's

savagery finds expression in her lies and her loveless affair, numbing herself with Xanax. John does not tolerate an instinctual, emotional life, rejecting this no matter the cost to himself or others, and disguising all this by a world of idealized intellectualism.

This is not a film about transformation. When Lenny dies and both children are standing before the corpse Wendy says, "Is that it?". Lenny's death has not changed anything in the moment. Shortly after there is the scene of John and Wendy in the same bed, together but not touching, neither giving direct comfort to the other. I believe this to be the ultimate recapitulation of the childhood drama, alone together, with good intentions but unable to be the healthy figure for the other to internalize.

This is a film that documents a struggle that is potentially transformative, and the final scenes provide the hope that this is happening. John seems happier and he reveals how he is testing the waters of a life that includes his desires, his emotions. He has not transmuted into a stereotyped romantic man giving up everything for love, but he is ready to check things out. Wendy is rehearsing a production of her play, the brutal childhood has found a healthy representation (notice the allusion to Peter Pan as the boy actor is hoisted into the air). And when we see her running with Marley in the contraption, we see that Wendy has been able to achieve a compromise; she could not keep an ideal Marley but she could intercede and ensure a happier existence for the both of them.

Wendy and John will be Savages forever, but just maybe the seed of something darling is now able to grow within them.