

ARTS

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Philip Seymour Hoffman and Laura Linney star in 'The Savages'. Their performances are good but the film needs more than two flashes of brilliance

A drama resolved too easily



The Savages
15 CERT, 115 MINS

Right from its fashionably misleading title (*Savage* is simply the surname of the family we follow) this film is indie film-making at its hippest. An air of faintly depressing lethargy hangs over everything, and its lead actors Philip Seymour Hoffman and Laura Linney underact with such exquisite limpness that they almost seem bored themselves. There are one-liners everywhere, odd things are said, conversations are had in tennis courts and other inappropriate places and it is all terribly trendy.

The problem is, the subject matter is rather serious, and after two hours of posturing I didn't feel any the wiser. Jon and Wendy are adult

brother and sister who have never really grown up (do you recognise the first names? Yup, Peter Pan). Wendy's lover is her 60-year-old married neighbour, and Jon's girlfriend has finally left him because he won't marry her and her visa has run out.

Wendy writes plays (which no-one produces) and Jon teaches the Theatre of Social Unrest at the University of Buffalo, New York. They are clever, erudite, sad figures whose lives have not turned out as they had hoped.

One day, they get a call from their estranged father's nurse. He is losing his mind, and they need to come and pick him up: suddenly, the two of them have to confront their lives, deal with responsibility and their shared history. In the process, they get to know each other once again.

The first thing that troubled me was that the "big issue" of the piece – dealing with the elderly, the pain of caring for dying parents – was never really addressed. It is as if someone said "I've got it – nursing homes, dying father – what a great vehicle for us to get to know our two characters".

Mr Savage (Philip Bosco) has some kind of dementia but the only things we learn about what life is like from his perspective is that he thinks he is living in a hotel (not a nursing home)

and that he likes the lava lamp that Wendy brings him. It is hinted that he was a terrible father (that pain in their shared past might explain the difficulties the two siblings are having in later life) but we never find out any more.

The siblings also manage to sort it all out with remarkable ease. The father doesn't cause much trouble, the nursing home is quite nice, and the

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whole business takes a matter of weeks. I felt short-changed. At least if you are going to make the definitive piece about caring for elderly parents, let's see some of the difficulties it can bring. At least if you are going to make a movie filled with depressed losers, give them a reason to be depressed. Their writers seemed so interested in thinking of amusing scenes to break up the gloom (such as one in which Jon is strapped into an

elaborate chin device to alleviate his neck pain) that they forgot to write the gloom in the first place.

From all the tired trendiness a couple of flashes of brilliance emerge. The first is an elaborate lie that Wendy makes up to her brother about having won an award from the Guggenheim trust for her writing – Jon checks up on it and proves it to be a lie. In fact, the only award she received was a cheque from FEMA in settlement of a compensation lawsuit for 9/11 ("I was traumatised, OK?" "The whole world was traumatised!") There is something brilliantly convincing about it as a brother-sister exchange.

The other is a black male nurse at the nursing home who becomes friends with Wendy; he explains that he will know when Mr Savage is about to die, because his toes will curl down two or three days before the end. It is a moment in which both the mystery and the physicality of death suddenly breaks through, and Wendy momentarily sees what she is dealing with.

The acting is good, the script intelligently written; the sets are clever and the shots atmospheric. But it needed more than a couple of good moments – in the end it is just another fashionable festival-filler.

Once past the smirk Weir's music soars



Judith Weir Weekend
LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, BARBICAN

I'm beginning to wonder whether these annual "composer weekends" aren't a little problematic. Do they really do anyone any good? Is there really any composer one would want to listen to for a whole concert, let alone a whole weekend?

We had the Bach Christmas on Radio Three a few years ago, the airing of every work that Bach composed. And the Beethoven week. But that's Bach and Beethoven. Their music is more like a necessary reprieve from the Webern day worked less well.

Anton Webern was a man of few notes. When played back to back, his six CDs worth of music fit comfortably within the day, between 9am and 9pm. So it was very easy to miss it, and I did – his entire life's output, when I went shopping.

These gluts don't seem to work for living composers either. The Gubaidulina weekend last year nearly pushed me over the edge. Imminent apocalypse is not something you want to hear every morning, noon and night.

Do I then just have a problem with the music of Judith Weir? I'm not entirely sure.

One of the problems of having a weekend dedicated to a living composer is that they're usually there. Hanging about in the audience, watching, listening, chatting, bounding on to the stage, making speeches, looking nervous. You sort of get to know them. Or you think you do. This can put you off their music, or draw you in.

Through, in the end, the music will do that too.

My introduction to Weir was through a Radio Three interview. She came across as pedantic and smug, with the quietly annoying air of a female vicar.

What I didn't realise until the Barbican series was that she also has an irritating waggish sense of humour. Irritated permanently in a state of near-hilarity, Weir's face seems to have the appearance of an unending smirk.

As does much of her early music, such as the *Exotic*. Mostly because there's never anything to smirk about – much of the so-called humour is of the trivial musical agit-prop kind. She will parody the weighty warbling of an operatic tenor or have a sly

dig at the traditional. When she drops her stand-up, things get better. Two of her best works are more earnest numbers, and at the Barbican both had the fortune of being performed by the Berlin Philharmonic of singing ensembles, the BBC Singers under David Hill. "All ends of the earth" is a religious song of rapture, wrapping a fervid female vocal line around the male *cantus firmus* of a setting of *Viderunt omnes* by Péroton. It's top-draw stuff, unleashing wave upon wave of plangent ecstasy.

There's more fervid ecstasies in the excellent *Missa del Cid*, which comes to a dramatic climax with an account of Cid's exploits at battle. After a last-gasp harmonic flowering among the male voices, we end on a surprisingly simple chord, safely, straightforwardly home.

It is one of Weir's great strengths: endings. They are almost always transformative codas, both in music and in mood, and completely fresh, and completely right. They will often offer strange new terrain, a world of leaks pipes, a sudden sweetness or an unexpected clarity, and leave mid-bar, mid-shimmer, encouraging the works to appear without end.

Less inspiring are her melodies, either too short, too simple, or too insipidly jaunty. A jauntness that comes from her use – and love – of folk songs, whose melodies and rhythms she takes and transforms.

I can't help but feel that if she really loved folk songs she'd leave them alone, or at least let them breathe. By shoving them in a formal orchestral setting, she restricts their swing and kills their purpose. Only in her *Songs from the Exotic* do these touchy home-spun meters bloom, just because she just leaves off.

Without the lyrical lines or any direct emotional appeal – her pieces are always reworked through brilliantly dry, historical myths – the focus is on the scene setting, the colour, the rhythmic figures and harmonic moves.

And this is where things become really unenjoyable. Linking the beguiling moments are impossibly forgettable passages: fast-rocking minimalist blocks; stodge repetitive rhythms; insipid string writing.

It's difficult to predict where the weak music will crop up. Early works like *King Harold's Saga* (sung delicately by Elin Manahan Thomas) are as exceptional as some later ones are poor.

When writing for the voice, however, Weir almost always excels – on *Buying a Horse* has already attained the status of a classic – and when she lets her music soar, such as the *Exotic*, the first act of her opera *The Vanishing Bridegroom*, when the bride (Ailish Fyran) sings headily of being between her groom's two arms till morning, she can even be moving.

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A factory boy's success

THEATRE REVIEW
La Cage aux Folles
MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Artistic director David Babani has in a very short space, audiences at the Menier Chocolate Factory in Southwark Street (just five minutes from London Bridge Station) into one of London's most successful fringe theatres. He has made a name for himself with miniature revivals of big Broadway musicals such as Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* and Alan Menken and Howard Ashman's *The Little Shop of Horrors*. Both of them were excellent and transferred to the West End. His first-rate revival of Patrick Marber's best play, *Dealer's Choice*, is now at Trafalgar Studios.

Jerry Herman's musical, *La Cage aux Folles*, which is based on Jean Poiret's gay cult French play (1973), opened in New York in 1983, winning many awards and appealing to a non-gay audience. It was seen all over the world and came to the London Palladium in 1986.

Herman's musicals include *Mama, Hello, Dolly!*, and *Mack and Mabel*. Georges and Albin are a middle-aged homosexual couple who run a transvestite nightclub in St Tropez. Albin is horrified to learn that his partner's son, whom he has helped to raise, wants to marry a girl

whose father is a homophobic politician and whom they are expected to entertain without letting on that they are gay.

La Cage, tuneful, sentimental, farcical, clichéd and old-fashioned, works amazingly well in a small space. Audiences at the Menier will feel that they are actually in a nightclub. Whatever you do, don't sit in the front row. Philip Quast is admirable as the suave discreet Georges. Douglas Hodge, surprisingly cast as the outrageous Albin, is very convincing as a drag artist, especially in his big number "I Am What I Am" and during the show-stopping "The Best of Times".

The History Boys
WYNDHAM'S THEATRE
Alan Bennett's debate on education, which originally opened at the National Theatre in 2004 and was a huge success in New York, is back in the West End for a second time and playing to full houses. Desmond Barrit is now in the role so memorably created by Richard Griffiths and he is superb as Hector, the liberal (very liberal), open-minded (very open-minded) teacher of general (very general) studies, who thinks not only that exams are the enemy of education, but that education is the enemy of education. He does not restrict himself to anything as boring as a syllabus and his lessons embrace old

songs, old movies and hilarious improvisations in French.

Hector's downfall is his habit of groping sixth formers for their hearts when they come home on his motorbike. The students, absurdly precocious and intellectual, are more than a couple of good moments – in the end it is just another fashionable festival-filler.

The headmaster, a philistine preoccupied with league tables, has no idea how to quantify an inspirational teacher and wants to sack him. Worried that the boys may not get scholarships to Oxford, he brings in a young supply teacher, who teaches them slick gimmicks and advises them that examiners want spin, not truth. The teacher ends up as a glib television historian and adviser to the government, advocating that: "The loss of liberty is the price we have to pay for freedom."

The History Boys, a funny, sad and pertinent, is a play which anybody interested in education should see, though I should perhaps warn you that, because of its subject matter, some people have dismissed it as "an apology for the molestation of pupils by teachers". It is, of course, absolutely nothing of the sort.

Robert Tanitch

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