

'Diane' Review: A Vibrant Tale of Love, Sisterhood and Decline

Jeannette Catsoulis

March 28, 2019

Critic's Pick



Mary Kay Place in "Diane," written and directed by Kent Jones. IFC Films

Diane

Buoyed by a movie lover's wish list of warmly familiar female faces, "Diane," the remarkable new film from the writer and director Kent Jones, is in part a meditation on dying that feels wondrously alive.

Set in rural Massachusetts (and filmed in New York), the story opens in a hospital where Diane (an astonishing Mary Kay Place) is visiting her terminally ill cousin, Donna (Deirdre O'Connell). Later, she'll check in on a convalescing neighbor, schlep clean laundry to her adult son, Brian (Jake Lacy, excellent), and, over a meal, respond sympathetically to the familiar gripes of her longtime friend Bobbie (Andrea Martin). By the time we see her volunteer at a soup kitchen, we feel we already know who this woman is.

In a series of carefully constructed scenes, Jones lays out a life of selfless service, of days defined by casseroles and concern. Yet Diane seems to derive little happiness from these ceaseless activities, her weary features suggesting a private hurt eased only by constant motion. It's there when she flinches before Brian's anger at her intervention in his latest tumble down the

12 steps; when she's gripped, momentarily, by the sight of an old man saying grace in the soup kitchen; and when she listens to Donna's mother (the great Estelle Parsons) talk briskly about loss and regret.

Past indiscretions haunt Diane, and this movie, and the glory of Place's performance — and that of her co-stars — is how barely these need to be verbalized. Emotions play across faces weathered by age and bonded by long experience, and the wonder is that a story this threaded with sickness and decline is neither tedious nor depressing. Each scene has its own specific energy and tone, conjured by a happy congruence of skillfully vivid acting, naturalistic conversations and a cinematographer, Wyatt Garfield, with a clear grasp of mood. Whether lingering on the candlelit faces of diners during a blackout, or watching calmly as Diane dances, drunkenly, alone in a bar, his camera feels completely in tune with his director's intent.

Filled with wintry roads and sensible clothing, "Diane" plays out at bedsides and in kitchens where women cheer one another with stories and memories. This is Jones's first narrative film, and he explains in the press notes that his aim was to make a picture about his great-aunts, a feisty, close-knit group who dominated family gatherings. It makes sense, then, that Brian is the only male character who really registers: other men mostly come and go in the background.