

# 'Diane' Review: Quiet, Shattering Character Study Is Essential Viewing

Critic/documentarian Kent Jones turns the story of a middle-aged woman into a shattering portrait of resilience — and a major work of art

[Peter Travers](#) March 27, 2019 12:00PM ET

Get ready for *Diane*, the first narrative feature from Kent Jones, the noted film critic, historian and director of the New York Film Festival — it has the power to sneak up and floor you. The title role is played by the magnificent Mary Kay Place (*The Big Chill*, *The Rainmaker*, *Manny & Lo*) in her finest two hours on screen. If you want to understand what nuanced acting is, study the quiet miracles Place performs here. Her woman on the verge is in a race with time. The years won't catch up with Diane (she's 70), not if she can outrun them. And this widowed retiree is doing her damndest. From her home in rural Massachusetts — you can almost feel the winter chill — Diane gets in her car and drives to where she's needed, which is practically everywhere. One minute she's serving food in a soup kitchen, the next she's in a local hospital visiting her cousin, Donna (Deirdre O'Connell), who's losing a fight with cervical cancer. Mostly, she's barging into the apartment of her son Brian (Jake Lacy), a thirtysomething slacker who lies around in an opioid/heroin daze when he's not cursing his mother for trying to get him up and functioning.

That's a day in the life of this everywoman. Place and Jones build it with such detailed intensity and acerbic humor that you can't turn away. There's no denying that this church-going do-gooder, one with a biting wit to match her flaring temper, can be an exasperating pain in the ass. People often call bullshit on her, even her loyal support group of women, played by the dynamite likes of Estelle Parsons, Andrea Martin and Phyllis Somerville. But

Diane, who makes a daily list of things to do, is never less than human, especially when her friends get old and die. The feeling of loneliness in the film is palpable. Aging in America tends to make people invisible. But not to Jones, who sees his heroine as the battling embodiment of life itself.

In his documentaries on filmmakers (including *Hitchcock/Truffaut*) and his study of producer/horror master Val Lewton, Jones has presented invaluable history lessons on cinema without a hint of academic pedantry. The director is slow to reveal the secrets that Diane can't escape, involving sins you can forgive but not forget. But with the help of an exemplary cast, the harsh truth comes through with ferocity and feeling. Lacy, so good as the sad sack in *Carol*, excels at showing how Brian trades drugs for a new addiction in a cult religion that he futilely pushes on his mother. This woman, who tries shooting up to understand what draws her son to drugs, is left adrift. "I taught myself to disapprove of you," her son tells her in a rare moment of wrenching clarity. Another haunting scene, set in a bar festooned with threadbare Christmas decorations, reveals Diane alone, gulping a margarita, hitting the jukebox to dance to Leon Russell's "Out of the Woods" and getting so wasted the bartender cuts off her. Like the lyric in the Seventies rocker's song, the lady is "goin' down a hard road" with no relief in sight.

And in the last section of the film, Jones (with the help of the gifted cinematographer Wyatt Garfield and composer Jeremiah Bornfield) deals with Diane's growing isolation, leaping ahead in time to reveal a woman unmoored but never undone. The structural shift is abstract, transcendent, even surreal. What's never in doubt, however, is the compassion the movie shows to its protagonist, partly based on the women in the filmmaker's own family and embodied by a great actress at her intuitive, indelible best. In capturing what Jones calls "the rhythm of living" even in the face of death, he has turned this character study into a shattering portrait of resilience — and an essential work of art.