

EXEGESIS for THE MATURE WOMAN
By
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The Mature Woman came into being some years ago and was merely a working title. However over time I have come to like the irony of the title. My protagonist represents the age of the baby boomers who aspire to being immature if that's what it takes to have fun, and the many women who have made a conscious decision to age 'ungracefully'.

There are a number of themes running through the script; the consciousness of ageing, power and control, fantasy versus reality, friendship, and nurturing.

I must acknowledge before continuing that the script is written from a white, female, middle class perspective and is only reflecting the mores of that sector of society. I want the movie to appeal to a sector of women who are fairly dominant, but I am aware are by no means exclusive.

The idea for the script came from an initial interest in providing a platform for older actresses who lamented for many years that in Hollywood they were unable to get parts past the age of forty. According to actress Rosanna Arquette "Hollywood is over-obsessed with starring young, gorgeous women in its films, and that roles 'all but dry up' once they get a few wrinkles and their bodies lose their perkiness" (news.bbc.com 17 May 2002). As a reaction to this Arquette made a documentary called *Searching for Debra Winger* which includes interviews with older actresses and their opinions on being sidelined. Salma Hayek expresses in her interview that there needs to be more female writers and directors as 'it is important that we take this responsibility as we have a lot to say' (news.bbc.com 17 May 2002).

Although Hollywood has been slow in acknowledging that there is a market for movies starring older women they are perhaps beginning to see the light, "some filmmakers and smaller distributors have discovered a secret society of mature moviegoers, and they have decided that this audience may actually be worth courting" (nytimes.com 02 July 2006). Yet Hollywood is still far behind the independent film sector, European producers and cable television, which have already recognised that the older viewing woman is a major market with great potential. Cable television in the US has been at the forefront of providing strong roles for older women in many of their television series such as *The Closer*, *Weeds*, and *Damages*. Michael Wright, a senior vice-president for Turner Entertainment Networks, told critics "as an executive, you're looking for stories that haven't been told and characters that haven't been explored" (jsonline.com 22 July 2007). Glenn Close has embraced the new opportunities that cable television has brought for older actresses. At 61 she won an Emmy for her role in *Damages* and in her acceptance speech she took note of the number of other forty-plus females who had either been nominated or won an Emmy that evening "I think we're proving complicated, powerful, mature women are sexy, high entertainment and can carry a show. I call us the sisterhood of the TV drama divas" (wowowow.com 22 Sep 2008).

Glenn Close also believes that in Hollywood movies “older women who aren’t just there to be pretty are considered problematic” (jsonline.com 22 Sep 2008). It could be said that any woman, whether old or not, can be considered problematic. It almost seems that Hollywood and its portrayal of women never really recovered after the introduction of the Production Code that governed Hollywood movies and their content between 1934 and 1968. The Production Code was a form of censorship which included the belief that movies should portray the sanctity of home and marriage.

“The best era for women’s pictures was the pre-code era.....Before the Code women on screen took lovers, had babies out of wedlock, got rid of cheating husbands, enjoyed their sexuality, held down professional positions without apologising for their self-sufficiency, and in general acted the way many of us think that women only acted after 1968” (Lasalle, 2000, p1). In the twenties and thirties lead women dominated the box office. They were young actresses but were representing a new age of women, which the audience loved, “Women’s stories were being told. They were being told well” (Lasalle, 2000, p165). In the mid 1930s the Daily Mirror “reviewing the fortunes of women over the previous 30 years, identified film stars as the most powerful influence” (Macdonald, 1995, p75). After the Code was introduced “the social dramas that took a woman’s point of view.....requiring of her no last-minute conversion, apology or reversion to happy subservience, all but disappeared” (Lasalle, 2000, p166).

When the Code was lifted women’s movies never seemed to fully recover. This may have been as a result of thirty years of movies depicting either subservient women or the destructive type of woman that characterised film noir. “Actresses of the new Millennium have to contend with a Hollywood in which there is little interest in women’s narratives, where women are turned into girls, where the most misogynistic creations of the male mind are palmed off as ‘strong’ and ‘assertive’ and where the shelf-life of an actress is still half that of a man” (Lasalle, 2000, p251). Although there are a number of highly paid female actors, it is still the Hollywood male actors who get the biggest pay cheques as they are seen as the more bankable stars, “in an era where risk-averse studio executives have declared men the more reliable movie stars – and the more desirable moviegoers – perhaps it’s no surprise that they are also the medium’s top earners. The reality: Hollywood’s 10 best paid actors out-earned Hollywood’s 10 best paid actresses 2-to-1 over the course of the year” (forbes.com 22 July 2008)

Hollywood has ignored a very influential part of the market by concentrating on the younger audience. The baby-boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, are a very large sector of society. They have money, health and longevity and they do not perceive of themselves as getting ‘old’ and they certainly do not see themselves reflected in the depiction of this age group as promoted by Hollywood. The baby-boomers “have thrived with a generational sense of spirited youthfulness that, more often than not, has a willingness and an enthusiasm for, breaking the rules” (Clurman and Walker, 2007, p5).

Margaret, the eponymous Mature Woman, is 51 years old and is certainly happy to break the rules. She is strong-willed, assertive and although there are reminders that she is ageing and that she has certain concerns about this, she does not believe that a life of decrepitude should be her fate. She is part of a growing movement of women who are asking 'What now?'

Suzanne Braun Levine, the founder of *Ms*, a feminist magazine, in her book *50 is the New Fifty* destroys the assumption that women want to remain ever youthful, "in terms of life experience, women are finding that their 50s, their 60s and even their 70s are a very exciting and authentic time" (New Zealand Herald from the Observer, 31 May 2009). Women are speaking out about how they feel and many women are actively doing something to ensure that they do not become invisible as they age. The erroneous belief that women want to be younger is something that is missed by those in marketing for "on a woman's wishlist wanting to be younger, famous or live like a movie star almost don't make it on the radar screen" (Barletta, 2003, p49). Martha Barletta, a marketing guru, states that companies are missing potential sales because of outdated depictions of women. I would venture to say that many of these advertising and marketing executives are taking their cue from the depictions they see in Hollywood movies. They have not taken on board that "for the last 20 years, in survey after survey, women have told advertisers that advertising offers little for them to identify with" and that "82 percent of women wish advertisers would recognize that they don't want to look 18 forever" (Barletta, 2003, p 172 & 173). Those that ignore the feedback will be missing out on future sales as "in the next decade, women will control two-thirds of the consumer wealth in the United States" (50fabulous, 2009).

Women do worry about their appearance as they age, but mainly because they are told to, or it is implied, in the way women of their age look in magazines and movies, "moviegoers have no idea what a real woman's forty- or fifty-year-old face looks like because photographers use lighting techniques, make-up, and other technical tricks to make sure older women appear ten to fifteen years younger in print and in films" (Rountree, 1993, p2). This is echoed by Gloria Steinem who when told by a reporter that she did not look 40 replied "This is what 40 looks like. We've been lying for so long, who would know?" (NZ Herald, 31 May 2009).

Although Margaret is anxious about the ageing process she is a strong character who has had a past and who is willing to embrace what the future may throw at her. This is very different from my original notion of the character. One of the themes that I explore in the movie is power versus subservience and my original character was definitely subservient to her husband, Graham. It was only after being shocked out of her complacency that she became empowered. However I was in fact depicting a stereotypical Hollywood woman of a certain age, whereas now Margaret and Graham are equals and the balance of power only tips with their individual reactions to stress and ageing.

The audience may not identify with what Margaret does, but I hope that the forces behind the transformation of my character are recognisable. She is a woman who wants this next part of her life to be an opportunity to explore new experiences. She has had an education, a career, a child and has benefited from the feminist movement and liberal values of her generation.

Margaret like many women of her age is peri-menopausal and despite being a health professional she is still not sure what to expect when menopause finally happens. In the past, once a woman hit the menopause, it was considered downhill all the way, but not now. It was also a taboo subject and so women, although they will have varying experiences of the menopause, considered it to be the end of their sexuality and their productiveness, not just as child-bearers but as members of society. Women were told they will forget everything that they had learned in the previous 50 years, they will never want sex again and that their bones would slowly crumble. The only area where women still had some use was in the domestic setting as a doting wife and grandmother.

Technology has opened up new lines of communication, and websites for the older woman are proliferating such as the *feistysideoffifty* website which allows women to discuss issues openly. Women now have access to information on the menopause and can learn from other women's experiences, and rather than finding women being negative about turning 50, we see women actually view it as a liberating time. They do not have to worry any longer about contraception, the children have left, or will be leaving home and many have financial independence, "researchers have found that the most profound difference in attitude between men and women at middle age is that women are twice as likely to be hopeful about the future" (time.com 08 May 2005).

Sexuality became more important in my script in reaction to the belief that after a certain age sexuality is either non-existent or it should be hidden. "Female sexuality, in media and advertising discourses, is normally perceived to end by the time a woman enters her forties" (Macdonald, 1995, p194). Graham and Margaret do have a sex life albeit one that has become predictable, but it is still a loving relationship. Margaret at one point thinks that Graham may be having an affair and automatically thinks that it is because she is no longer physically attractive. Margaret comes across as a strong woman, but like many people she still has her insecurities. Part of Margaret's fascination with the life of a dominatrix is that age is an advantage and that an older woman can display her sexuality and it will be appreciated and adored by the customers.

Chris Holmund argues that we are led to believe that men in movies can age gracefully and become more attractive as they get older, for example Clint Eastwood. But for a female, "because the aging body is a disintegrating body and because to look at and identify with aging bodies jeopardizes the narcissistic pleasures of a lifetime, for young and old alike, age spots remained blind spots for critics and spectators of all ages" (Holmlund, 2002, p87). However if paying

customers can enjoy the presence of a dominatrix then why not a movie audience, after all they can't possibly be totally mutually exclusive.

This implies that it is only males that will be looking at Margaret with pleasure. Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* figures cinema as "irreducibly shaped by sexual difference, arguing that film is constructed around the looks or gazes, which in turn shape editing and narrative, and , further, that these looks are completely and eternally those of men looking at women" (Humm, 1997, p 17). Superficially it may appear that I am doing something similar with Margaret as it will be mainly men who will fetishise the dominatrix figure, yet as a dominatrix Margaret controls the gaze of both males and females.

It was always my intention with Margaret to show a woman who begins a new life after 50, but it was not my original intention that she should become a dominatrix. However, after some thought it emerged as the perfect solution as a dominatrix showcases the themes that I wanted to explore, the most obvious being power versus subservience. As a dominatrix the woman has the power and the man (it is usually men although not always) pays to be subservient and theoretically castrated. Although dominatrices are classified as part of the sex industry, the "genuine dominatrix does not in fact have sex with her clients" (davidblyth.com *Mistress Jasmyn's Review* 2001). This does not mean that some men do not get some sexual gratification, but being dominated is also a psychological release. A number of clients will visit a dominatrix for non-sexual needs as they 'have intense personal and psychological reasons, such as claiming power over past negative issues, or reliving happy memories" (Gloria-brame.com 1998). A number of men who visit a dominatrix have high-powered jobs where they have to make decisions but when they visit a dominatrix they relinquish all control to that dominatrix, "Men are the ones gifted with all sorts of power in our society but....so many of them long to strip themselves of this power, to be tied down, gagged, spanked, taken, owned. They want to be made to do a woman's bidding They want to ease the burdens of manliness" (Bussel, 2008, pvii). The dominatrix overtly shows her sexuality but she is to look at only and not to touch, and the slave sees her not as a sexual object but as "an intelligent, funny, passionate, compelling and powerful woman" (davidblyth.com, *Mistress Jasmyn's Review* 2007).

The world of domination is all about fantasy. This fantasy is constructed between the mistress and her client and for an hour they assume their roles and act out the client's fantasy in a safe environment. "Unlike a stage actress portraying a character with prescribed lines, a dominatrix is an actress with authority to be creative. I write the play, based on the client's ideas. I choose appropriate words and actions and I interact with my audience of one" (davidblyth.com *The Dominatrix in the Theatre of Fantasy by Mistress Margaret*, 2001)

Margaret not only offers domination services but also takes the part of the mummy-figure. This is to satisfy the desires of those men who wish to revert to their childhood either because they feel they may have missed out on a mother's love, or they want to return to a simpler time when they had to make no decisions as these were made for them by their mother. Margaret, despite being a nurse and having a child, displays no overt signs of a nurturing nature and in fact admits that she finds this supposed feminine side of her lacking. It is ironical that she becomes a mummy-figure in her profession and is an example of the roleplay theme in that she can become anything in the fantasy world if the price is right.

Unlike for most professions, Margaret fits into the ideal age bracket to become a dominatrix and mummy-figure. The men visiting her must view her as someone who has total control, which often comes with age and experience. In the world of domination a woman does not have the conventional worries about their looks and size, "when it comes to domination, power is sexier than good looks" (Mistress J, 2002, p39) and "a client who is looking for a mothering session for instance, usually isn't interested in seeing a dominatrix who is thin and looks more like his older sister than his mother" (Mistress J, 2002, p41).

Being a dominatrix is the perfect 'second life' for Margaret who is in her prime for this new career, which gives her independence, money and adoration. The term 'second life' is also a play on computer terminology for virtual life. Computer players can adopt an avatar and become somebody completely different and can construct different experiences to the ones that they have in real life. Margaret is able to do this on a physical level with her role as a dominatrix.

I originally became interested in the idea after reading about Jody Hanson, a professor at Waikato University, who during her research for a paper on the link between the sex industry and the tourist industry in New Zealand, became fascinated with the dominatrices that she interviewed. So fascinated that at the age of 45 she became a novice dominatrix under the tutelage of Mistress Margaret in Auckland, who in a previous life had been a health professional. Jody Hanson, now known as Mistress J, has her own dominatrix practice in Melbourne. She has given up a life of academia in favour of this new profession, which she enjoys for its variety, financial rewards and the insights that it provides, "to me, the transfer of power was the most fascinating aspect of being a mistress, learning that a client would willingly hand over his power and control – and pay for the privilege" (Mistress J, 2002, p29).

Friendship for many women is an important aspect of their lives and it can take many different forms. Margaret and Graham are friends and so when Margaret discovers that Graham has been visiting a dominatrix it is not just her role as a sexual partner that she feels has been overturned, but she feels betrayed in that Graham has secrets and a life that she is not part of. Celia is the female friend and is very similar to Margaret. They can share jokes and both are open-minded.

I do not want Margaret to appear as a one-off, but someone who represents a new generation of women.

Michal has always been part of the story and he is one character that has not changed. He has always been an obsessive-compulsive nerd, but in the nicest possible way. It has never been my intention that Michal should be seen as a character of ridicule or that he is a romantic element for Margaret, but that they form a friendship on equal footing that allows each of them to flourish. Michal's transformation comes through amateur dramatics. He finds it easier to take roles and be other people than to be himself. But through roleplay he comes somehow to liberating his inner self, so that eventually the difference between Michal the public persona and the 'real' Michal becomes blurred. Michal is only doing what most people have always done, but it has taken him over 30 years to understand the art of dissembling.

In looking at the male characters I felt that I was doing a disservice to males and that was not my intention. Graham is seeing a dominatrix, Simon, the son, takes drugs, Michal is an obsessive-compulsive. The male characters seemed more flawed than the females and so I had to make a conscious effort to redress the balance. John, Celia's husband, had to become stronger as a character and not just an appendage of Celia. Although my main audience will be females, I do not intend to alienate the male viewers.

It would be impossible to talk about the script without some mention of the feminist influence. Feminism and post-feminism have been seen as influential in movies made by women and according to Jane Arthurs "for a younger generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, feminism, instead of appearing radical, has become associated with their parents' generation and can therefore be perceived as an establishment ideology whose codes restrict their freedom of expression" (Arthurs, 2004, p130). I would argue that it is not quite as simple as that. Many women of Margaret's generation would have supported the ideals of the feminist movement, but they are also the generation of anti-establishment with the liberal, free-love days of the 60s, the student revolutions, and the 'destroy the establishment' punk generation of the late 70s. Many baby-boomers see their own children as reactionary and politically disengaged, being far more concerned with getting a good degree, good job and plenty of money. But as Simon implies, Margaret and Graham were of a time when they had the luxury of being able to go on student marches and indulge their political convictions, as they did not have to pay for their tertiary education, and they anticipated a constant flow of money from the state when they retired.

Simon feels that he was deprived of his mother's attention during his formative years as Margaret continued to work throughout his childhood, and Margaret feels guilty. This is the seemingly constant dilemma for women – how to be the perfect career woman and the perfect mother, or it is according to the media.

The *Mature Woman* is a humorous look at the dilemma of the 50 plus generation. I hope that not just this generation will find some relevance, but also those in their twenties and thirties who have ever been embarrassed by their parents and want to know why their parents behave as they do.

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