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Light from Light

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Light from Light

Abstract

This is a film review of *Light from Light* (2019) directed by Paul Harrill.

Author Notes

Jeanette Reedy Solano, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at California State University, Fullerton. She is Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Unit in the American Academy of Religion and serves on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Religion & Film*. In addition to academic work in the field, Dr. Solano has directed and produced two short films and a documentary. She is currently working on *Religion and Film: The Basics* for Routledge Press.



Light from Light (2019), dir. Paul Harrill

“Are you a believer or a skeptic?” is the straightforward question put to the protagonist, Sheila (Marin Ireland), in the opening scene of *Light from Light* which premiered at Sundance in the category of NEXT films. We must patiently watch and wait as Sheila muses over her response to the radio show host interviewing her about her paranormal experiences before she ultimately confesses: “I don’t know.” Her sincerity and desire to explore sets the tone for a quiet, contained story about death, loss, the complexity of grief and regret, and ultimately the healing power of human connection and moving on.

Set in Tennessee, *Light from Light* is the second feature film from writer-director Paul Harrill, an associate professor and associate director of the Cinema Studies program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The explicit religious and spiritual answers of his first feature, *Something, Anything* (2015), are shrouded with ambiguity in this tale. His pace is very slow and Southern, his script spartan, punctuated with a few scenes of profound encounter and dialogue.

His directorial style is not for everyone; however, it does yield a provocative human story, and he gets out of the way of his lead actors so that they can impact the viewer.

The atypical ghost story follows single mom, Shelia, as she tries to aid widower Richard Barnes (Jim Gaffigan as you have never seen him). Barnes wonders if his dead wife Susanne may be haunting his farmhouse due to flickering lights, moving keys, and a hand he felt on his shoulder. Shelia, a recently-independent ghost hunter “between teams” conscripts her high school aged son Owen (Josh Wiggins) and his charismatic classmate, Lucy (Atheena Frizzell) onto her new team and agrees to investigate.

Like Harrill's first film, this is a story about spiritual longing for something more. Both the disillusioned ghost hunter and the grieving husband articulate their deep desire for the afterlife and a spiritual dimension to be real. “People think ghosts are scary, but I think it would be wonderful if they were real,” says Richard, early in the film. Sheila shares a similar sentiment with the priest after a church service. Harill’s story does not completely satisfy these longings or answer ontological queries definitively, but it allows for their possibility and certainly hints that these desires are an innate and valuable part of being human.

The strengths of the film include the strong, restrained, authentic performances by Marin Ireland and James Gaffigan. Ireland is an award-winning actress, a veteran of Broadway and television. Her portrayal of life-worn, yet still hopeful, Sheila is masterful and mesmerizing. Her eyes capture her pain and loss as well as her abundant compassion. Sheila is a survivor who, despite life’s disappointments, cares deeply about those around her and has a quiet confidence and sincerity that ground their quest.

Light from Light is one of two dramas featuring Gaffigan at Sundance this year (the other being Gaffigan as a snake-handling Pentecostal father in *Them that Follow*, also reviewed in this

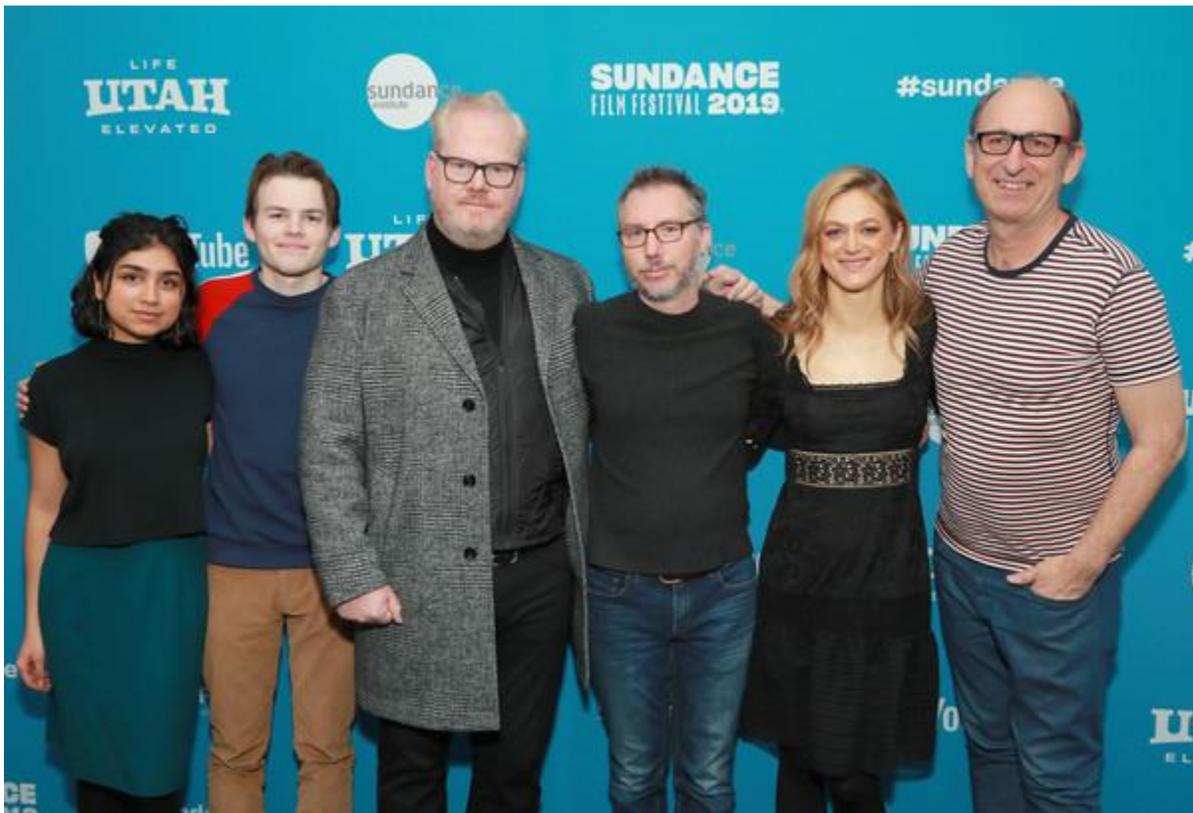
issue by John Lyden). In real life, Gaffigan is an outspoken believing and practicing Roman Catholic who was attracted to the character of the wounded widower searching for something more. “I need to believe there is something that can forgive me...that I am not in control,” he said in a recent interview related to the film. Perhaps this posture is why his portrayal of the haunted Richard who is comforted by the idea of the afterlife feels so real. Richard is depressed, going-through-the motions, sad, needy, vulnerable, and open. What I most appreciated about his portrayal of the grieving husband is his quiet demonstration of the complex process of grief and healing which is usually two steps forward, one backwards. For example, there is no “aha” moment of closure when he visits the wreckage of his wife’s downed plane, just a pause and a shrug, wonderfully capturing how complex letting go is. Sometimes the rituals we think will bring us closure don’t.

Many viewers with an interest in the afterlife and ghost stories will naturally compare *Light from Light* to another indie film that dealt with love, loss and the afterlife, *Ghost Story* (2017), starring Casey Affleck. Beyond the southern setting, the painfully slow pace, and the fact that both films were produced by David Lowery, they have little in common, and I strongly prefer *Light from Light*. *Ghost Story* is obsessed with the ghost’s unfinished business and longing, whereas *Light from Light* focuses on those who are left behind with regret, loneliness, and grief. While the living, grieving partners in each film may binge to fill their voids (Gaffigan’s character on pizza, and Rooney Mara’s on pie) their development could not differ more. I prefer Harrill’s portrayal of the complexities of human grief.

Production values vary in *Light from Light* with unimpressive cinematography, set, and art design, but mention should be made of Johnny Marshall’s excellent sound design, for example the rich ambient sound (captured on set) of slamming old screen doors to crickets and katydids that

brings us unto Richard's farmhouse porch. Another cinematic element that merits praise is the score by Adam Granduciel and Jon Natchez which is just the right blend of subtlety and Tennessee heart. Speaking of Tennessee, the foggy Smoky Mountains are the perfect backdrop for the opacity that is part of the grieving process.

I won't reveal if Susanne's ghost appears, yet ultimately this matters little, for this a story of a haunting, not a ghost. It is a hopeful story of death, betrayal, regret, loss, and ultimately embracing life and risking love. The message, in the end, is that we are not alone: in life or in death.



(L-R) Actors Atheena Frizzell, Josh Wiggins, and Jim Gaffigan, director/writer Paul Harrill, and actors Marin Ireland and David Cale attend the "Light From Light" Premiere during the 2019 Sundance Film Festival at Filmmaker Lodge on January 28, 2019 in Park City, Utah. (Jan. 27, 2019. Rich Fury/Getty Images North America)