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The Philadelphia Inquirer

## Just try to find films that have a frisky female of middle age

"What bugs me is that movies don't reflect how interesting and vibrant women are. We don't treasure women as they get older." - actress Jill Clayburgh, 58, costar of "Never Again"

By Karen Heller  
Inquirer Staff Writer

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Everyone ages. Except lusty women in movies, who mostly just vanish when they reach a certain age. The studios retain Harrison Ford or Michael Douglas, Al Pacino or Jack Nicholson, and find this year's lovely, lissome and young enough to call her costar Grandpa.



'Never Again,' with Jeffrey Tambor and Jill Clayburgh, is a rare comedy with a lusty older woman.

"In Hollywood, women only have three ages," Goldie

Hawn says in *The First Wives Club*: "babe, district attorney, and *Driving Miss Daisy*."

In other words, Maggie Smith, Judi Dench and Brenda Blethyn, kiss your passports. And Ellen Burstyn, so nice to see you again. But all of your resumes have been light on the libidinous in recent years.

The lovers in Eric Schaeffer's *Never Again*, at the Ritz at the Bourse and Ritz NJ/Sixteen, are consumed with exploring carnal knowledge, yet saddled with a morbid fear of any nonphysical intimacy. Their inquiries include what are politely called "marital aids" and various forms of pleasure that cannot be described in a

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newspaper.

What makes them different is that the lovers are 54, portrayed by the still-radiant Jill Clayburgh as a divorced social worker and Jeffrey Tambor (Hank Kingsley of *The Larry Sanders Show*), who is short of hair, large of gut, yet still beguiling as an exterminator and jazz pianist.

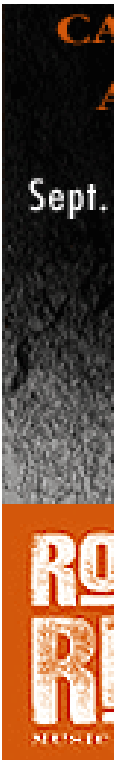
In April, at the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, audiences middle-aged, older and younger responded to *Never Again* with enthusiasm, say its director and star.

"It's a little alarming that there isn't a movie about a woman over 35 interested in sex who doesn't get decapitated," observes Sandy Duncan, more saucy, less perky, as Clayburgh's friend in the film. Older moviegoers don't need to be told that she's referring to those randy-femme morality classics *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* and *Fatal Attraction*.

This summer is seeing a spate of movies about boys and considerably older women. There's *Tadpole*, in which 52-year-old Sigourney Weaver is the object of her 15-year-old stepson's desire. And Catherine Keener, at 40 cast as a bored wife who dallies with a 17-year-old in *Lovely & Amazing*. But that's a male fantasy, that Mrs. Robinson thing. (Oh, she's back, too - on Broadway, where Kathleen Turner, 48, seduces Jason Schwartzman, 22.)

Clayburgh isn't new to love scenes. There was 1978's *An Unmarried Woman*, and *Starting Over* the following year. But *Never Again's* are the first she's done in ages.

"Let's not talk of years, darling," says the actress, who, like her costar, is 58. Mostly, Clayburgh has been getting roles as mothers, including Ally McBeal's mother, not as a love interest.



"You accept it, and it stinks. You can get nutty, and go ranting like Cher," says Clayburgh, whose daughter, Lily Rabe, stars as her daughter in *Never Again*, in one scene walking in on her in bed with Tambor. "What bugs me is that movies don't reflect how interesting and vibrant women are. We don't treasure women as they get older."

Schaeffer wrote his fifth film specifically for Clayburgh and Tambor after performing with them in NBC's *Everything's Relative*, which aired for four episodes in 1999.

"I liked the idea of making a love story that just happens to be about people in their 50s," says Schaeffer, 40. "As the characters say in the movie, 'When you get older, the stakes get higher. You have so much more to lose by becoming attached.' I loved the emotional depth of these characters."

He cites 1999's *Random Hearts* as another movie with lovers past the age of puberty, but Harrison Ford was 18 years older than Kristin Scott Thomas. Ditto the recent *Unfaithful*, in which Richard Gere plays Diane Lane's husband and is 16 years her senior.

Television isn't much better. An exception is Frances Conroy, 48, whose Ruth Fisher on HBO's *Six Feet Under* has had two lovers since her husband's death. Peter Krause, who plays her son, is 36. God forbid they should cast a convincingly sexual actress who really is old enough to have a middle-aged child.

Most movies with mature sweethearts are European. Catherine Deneuve, Jeanne Moreau, Simone Signoret, Sophia Loren and Fanny Ardant continued to get romantic roles as they matured. In this country, the still-ravishing Susan Sarandon, 55, has spent years playing nuns and supplying voices in *Rugrats in Paris* and *Cats & Dogs*. In the September release *Igby Goes Down*, she's the cruel mother of a modern-day

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Holden Caulfield.

Barbra Streisand continues to pair herself with mature men in romantic movies, Jeff Bridges in 1996's *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, and Nick Nolte in 1991's *The Prince of Tides*. As the director, she has ultimate casting approval.

Part of the problem is a lack of literary material. Jeanne Ray discovered how great a vacuum there was when she published her first novel, *Julie and Romeo*, in 2000. The book flips the Shakespeare play on its head, asking how the children would react if two grandparents of opposing families fell in love.

"I wrote it for myself as a 60th-birthday present," says Ray, 64, a nurse and the mother of Ann Patchett, whose *Bel Canto: A Novel*, has won the PEN/Faulkner Award and Orange Prize. "I wanted to write a love story about two vigorous, attractive 60-year-olds who fall in love."

*Julie and Romeo* has sold a half-million copies.

"Everywhere I go, readers are just breathtakingly excited about the whole idea that someone would write a book where 60-year-olds are still sexual, active and loving," Ray says. Her *Step-Ball-Change*, published in May, portrays an older couple "who have had a long marriage, and continue to have a very physical relationship."

Ray wrote when she couldn't find what she wanted to read. "There's this theory that 60-year-olds are waiting around for retirement, and they would never dream of having sex."

After inquiries by Nora Ephron's production company, Ray's first book has been optioned three times by the same director, Barbra Streisand.

And odds are good this one will get made. Ms. Streisand's favorite leading lady

turned 60 this year.

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