

'Thelma' is a geriatric 'Mission: Impossible' and a total crowd-pleaser

At 94, June Squibb defies all the big-screen clichés about little old ladies. Ride along with her.

Review by Ty Burr

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June Squibb plays a woman on a mission and Fred Hechinger is her concerned grandson in "Thelma." (Magnolia Pictures)

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★★★★ (4 stars)

Have you heard about the new youth tonic that's just arrived on the market? It's called "Thelma," it's playing at your local movie house, and it stars the incomparable June Squibb as a grandma who gets scammed and sets out to get her money back.

Squibb's been acting professionally for the last seven decades or so, but she's only been getting bigger parts in recent years, with her performance as Bruce Dern's ornery wife in "Nebraska" (2013) earning her a supporting actress Oscar nomination. "Thelma" marks her first lead role in a feature film, and it's safe to say that, at 94, a star is born. There's a lesson there, children.

"Thelma" casts Squibb as Thelma Post, an elderly widow living contentedly and independently in Los Angeles' Encino neighborhood, despite the loving concerns of her daughter Gail (Parker Posey), son-in-law Alan (Clark Gregg) and 24-year-old grandson Danny (Fred Hechinger). Danny, sweet and distracted, may not have figured out his own life yet, but he has Thelma in his corner as cheerleader and best friend; their relationship is one of the early delights of writer-director Josh Margolin's debut feature-length film.

It's that bond, though, that undoes Thelma when a scammer pretending to be a jailed Danny calls her on the phone and convinces her to part with \$10,000 in "bail money." Once the

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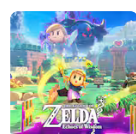
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ruse is revealed, Thelma is more embarrassed and angry than bewildered, especially since it gives her family further ammunition for talking about assisted living. “Thelma” subverts movie clichés about little old ladies at every turn by making the character fiercely individualistic and no one’s victim — sometimes to her own disadvantage — and Squibb responds by building Thelma from the inside out. She’s not just anybody’s grandmother, she’s this very particular woman who happens to be a grandmother. And you kind of want her to be *your* grandmother.

Anyway. Thelma vows with narrowed eye to retrieve her money, and, while she no longer drives, she has a P.O. box number in Van Nuys as a clue. (Don’t look too hard at the logic or logistics of the scam; it’ll only distract from the fun.) Enter Richard Roundtree as Thelma’s old friend Ben, who lives in a nearby care community (and likes it, thank you very much) but, more importantly, has a spiffy red mobility scooter that can go 43 miles on one charge. By the scene in which our hardy heroine takes Ben’s ride for a spin — and just keeps on going — you know you’re watching something very special.



Richard Roundtree and June Squibb get the lead out in “Thelma.” (Magnolia Pictures)

“Thelma” doesn’t rest just on the gutsy charms of its lead actress, but on everybody in the show. Roundtree, in the “Shaft” star’s final performance before his death in October 2023, makes Ben a fussy but loyal companion on the bumpy road to retribution, and Posey is marvelously funny as a tightly wound helicopter mom/daughter. Her and Gregg’s scenes with Hechinger’s Danny are blissful sendups of Parents Who Worry Too Much, and Hechinger responds with a shaggy, exasperated grace that will be recognizable to anyone who’s been stuck too long in prelaunch mode.

Even the smaller roles are choice, including Nicole Byer and Quinn Beswick as beleaguered staffers at the elder care community from which Ben has gone AWOL and David Giuliani as Ben’s roommate, who becomes a kind of running sight gag that keeps paying off. As for the identity of the



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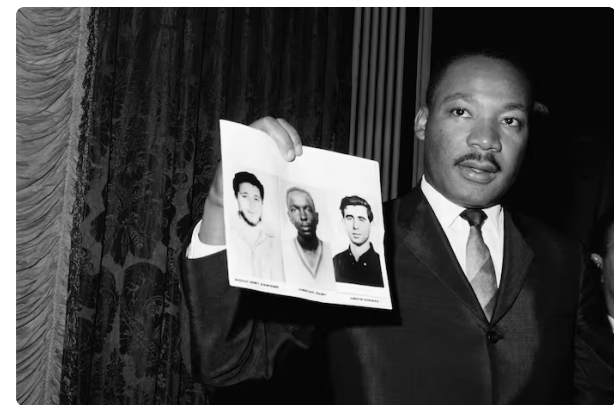
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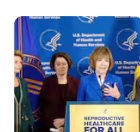
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...right gag that keeps paying off. As for the identity of the scammer, suffice to say the role has been cast to perfection with an actor you believe might actually rip off old ladies in his spare time.

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Secondly, Margolin, whose résumé is mainly acting credits, has a new career ahead of him because “Thelma” is rock solid in its story construction, in the confidence of its filmmaking and in the expert detonation of jokes along the way. (One of my favorites: Danny desperately searching for Thelma throughout Ben’s assisted-living community, calling out “Grandma?” and being answered by a “Hello?” from every room on the hallway.) Art this movie isn’t. Good, unshowy narrative storytelling the way they used to make ’em before the superheroes took over it is.

Lastly, what keeps “Thelma” from floating away on a bubble of whimsy is the film’s acknowledgment of the sorrows and struggles that come with old age: the rusty joints, the small daily humiliations, the loneliness above all. At one point in their odyssey, Ben and Thelma drop in on an old friend (Bunny Levine) who’s become fossilized in the amber of early dementia; the sequence ends with one of the best gags in the movie, but the sadness lingers. On its least forced and most moving level, “Thelma” is about the indomitable human urge to *keep going* and the hard-won wisdom to know when to heed time’s warnings. It’s a movie that rages against the dying of the light — at 30 mph.

(Stick around through the credits for a postscript: brief footage of the real Thelma, Margolin’s own grandmother, whose near-scamming inspired the movie and whose endless curiosity and zest have been imported intact to her namesake. Last we heard, she’s 104 and going strong. There’s a lesson there, too.)

PG-13. At area theaters. Contains strong language. 97 minutes.

Ty Burr is the author of the movie recommendation newsletter [Ty Burr’s Watch List at tyburrswatchlist.com](http://tyburrswatchlist.com).

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