

MOVIE REVIEW: *CALENDAR GIRLS*

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The film "Calendar Girls" depicts the true story of a group of women in middle and older adulthood who are compelled by a shared ideal to challenge gender-based protocols and institutional expectations. One mature woman's determination to find a way to raise money for the local hospital sets a group of her female friends in motion. As a group, and with mutual support and encouragement, the women dare to consider a fund-raising method that eventually attracts local, national and international attention and helps raise a sum of money beyond everyone's wildest expectations.

In the town of Knapely, in Yorkshire, England, middle-aged Chris (Helen Mirren) uses her ingenuity, sense of social responsibility, and leadership and collaborative skills to engage members of her organization, The Women's Institute, in a fund-raising project. While waiting in the "relatives' room" with her long-time friend, Annie (Julie Walters), when John, Annie's husband, receives radiation treatments, Chris concludes that a new couch is needed. Her chosen means of raising funds – selling a calendar with the pictures of Institute members naked (or "nude," as they prefer to say) – violates the organization's protocol for member behavior and invites diverse reactions from husbands, children and community members. The uncontrollable laughter of two young female clerks in the studio in which the nude pictures are developed, the disdain with which Chris' adolescent son (who keeps a magazine of nude young women under his mattress) reacts to the project, and the ridicule he is subjected to by his class-

mates as a result of his mother's action, reflect the prevalence of ageist attitudes in a youth-oriented society. The opposition of the women's husbands (including one who practices infidelity) reflects culturally condoned patriarchal practices. The reaction of the local, national, and international press to a calendar with pictures of nude older and middle-aged women confirms the universality of biased gender and age-based belief systems; ironically, however, it is due in part to these very biases that the project ends up being such a tremendous success.

Eleven women, at different stages of adulthood, pose; one for each of the first eleven months of the year (they pose as a group for the December photograph). The women are modest and much concerned about the propriety of what they have agreed to do. Their deliberations, comments and expressions of embarrassment as the photographer makes suggestions of how to position their nude or semi-nude bodies reflect their socialization into cultural gender and age-based expectations of behavior conduct. However, their involvement with such an innovative and controversial project broadens their horizons as they discover their ability to make an impact beyond their immediate families and social organization. Each successful step in their endeavor empowers them to move forward with more determination and stronger commitment to the project. As Chris realizes that their work can make a difference not only in furnishing one hospital room with a couch but in supporting cancer research, she explores and uses multiple ways to advertise the project

and promote calendar sales. She and the other calendar models give interviews; as the word of their project spreads, they begin to encounter reporters when they open their doors to pick up the morning paper or the milk delivery.

Their reputation as daring older women eventually attracts the attention of the Hollywood movie industry, and they are invited to travel to Hollywood for interviews, appearances on television shows, and shooting of commercials. During their visit, the women receive Hollywood's lavish treatment, strengthen their sense of self-confidence, are empowered to challenge stereotypes, and have the depth of their friendships tested.



The movie is beautifully shot, with lingering shots of the green pastures and blooming trees and flowers that make up the Yorkshire landscape. The dialogue is smart and entertaining. The internal and interpersonal tribulations that each woman experiences following her decision to participate in the project are presented honestly and realistically; the audience can easily identify with every step in the women's decision-making process. The impact that collective action can have on women as individuals is presented powerfully. Witnessing how these unassuming and traditional older women are electrified and transformed by an idea that promises to bring them new (and perhaps even scandalous) adventures confirms the power of the human spirit and the toxically limiting effects of stereotypes. We see a 55-year-old woman whose dress and overall demeanor make her look much

older than her age responding to the invitation to be a calendar model with: "I am 55 years old, and if I am not going to get them [her breasts] out now, when, then?" We then witness how her involvement in the project leads to her transformation into an elegant, confident, and sexy woman – a woman who is, in virtue of being freed from expectations of what a 55-year-old woman *should* be like, a much happier woman.

Reflecting upon the experiences of the older women of Knapely can spur us to revisit our conceptions of the human capacity for personal growth and social contributions during older adulthood. Such an alteration can lead to the dispelling of myths about aging and reduce the negative effects of age, role and gender-based stereotypes.