

# Real Life Drama

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ment of the characters connected with the physical and emotional development of the cast, and the filming involved no exterior judgment of the product — as Linklater puts it, for years it was all process, no product.

The result plays more like real life than any non-documentary feature I can remember. The drama of the lives of the family members is made up of small moments: Samantha deliberately annoying her brother with a Britney Spears song; the kids eavesdropping on mom arguing with her boyfriend; the two competing for the attention of their wayward dad after a long absence; Mason perusing a lingerie catalogue with his pals; the accumulation of signs that the kids' new stepdad has a drinking problem; a fishing trip between Mason and his dad in which you hear Mason's voice changing; and a laconic adolescent Mason being lectured by a series of adults.

Never have movie children looked and sounded more like actual kids. Unlike the usual well-scrubbed and articulate movie children, these kids sometimes look as though their clothes don't fit quite right, or they have bad haircuts or acne. They are

cute kids, but the kind of cute kids you might actually meet. And they are sometimes maddening — sulky and uncommunicative, or self-absorbed. Their conversations with their peers sound like these kids overestimate what they know, and you cringe with recognition as you watch them overshoot which experiences they are ready for.

The parents, too, look familiar. They are by turns beleaguered, or lazy, or harried; they miss the strain their choices put on the children. Mom (Patricia Arquette) presents a combination of attentive and blind that is rarely depicted so accurately; she loves and listens to her kids, but seems to have a knack for picking men who will and do jeopardize their well-being. And dad (Ethan Hawke) seems at times to be playing at parenthood, yet you see how his intentions toward his kids nudge him to grow up himself.

The flexibility and trust involved in Linklater's process yields an authenticity that couldn't be arrived at any other way. It reminded me of the quality of conversation that becomes possible when you make a habit of showing up over and over again; you may not ever have the silver bullet revelation that explains the arc of a relationship, but you will share plenty of small moments that

will yield glimmers of the soul of the other. Linklater and his cast have constructed a container for something ineffable: and rich.

The tenderness here will make you weep for your own childhood, or that of your children. It will nudge you to reflect on your own efforts to explain something difficult to a child, or to answer questions for which you don't have answers, or don't trust the answers. It will remind you of just how darling an awkward adolescent can be.

*Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. You can find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.*

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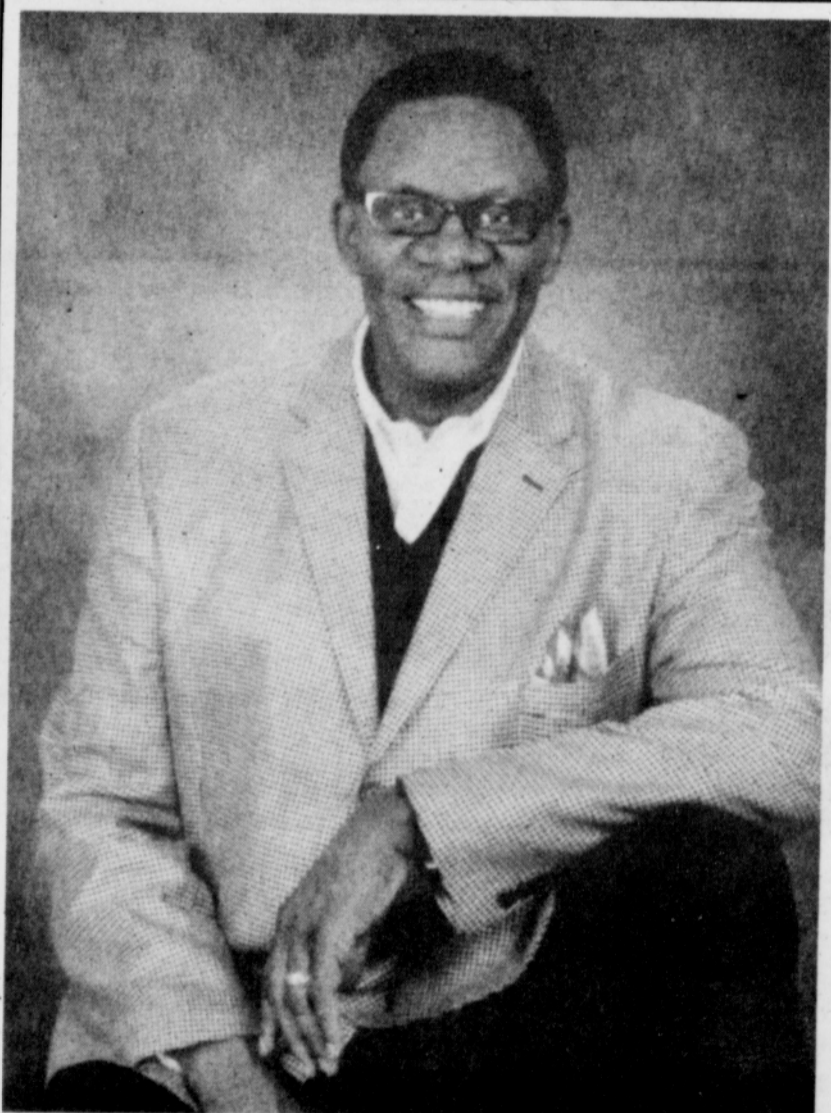
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