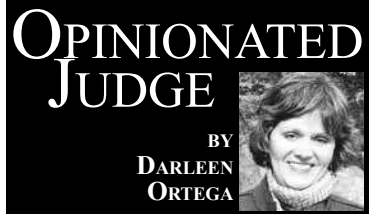


A Refusal to Cave and a Right to Assert



New film depicts woman in a fight for her home

"Do you know when you feel mad, but you actually know you are not mad?"

Clara (the great Sonia Braga), the 65-year-old protagonist of the new Brazilian film, "Aquarius," poses this question, and knows the feeling. Clara is locked in a fight against greedy developers who want to demolish the apartment building where she has lived comfortably for decades. She is the last hold-out -- indeed, the last resident -- in her otherwise empty building, and apparently the developers have succeeded somehow in buying out the other owners under some arrangement where they will not be fully paid until Clara follows suit. Now she looks like the crazy one -- the "mad" one -- for holding out -- and yet she is completely within her rights to do so. And she is more clear than angry.

The film is mostly a character study -- of a rare female film protagonist over 40 who is not there as comic relief, or as someone's mother or grandmother. So many women's stories don't get told; one can enjoy this one purely as an opportunity to sit with how this woman engages with the world from her particular social location. She is educated,



Actress Sonia Braga fights greedy developers who want to demolish her apartment building in the new Brazilian film, "Aquarius."

culturally aware, strong-minded, and has loving relationships with a host of friends of all ages, her brother, her children, a long-time employee, and a beloved nephew. She is inquisitive, and capable of a principled fight. She is a widow, attractive, interested in sex, yet impatient with the options available to her. Much of the film's pleasure is simply in sitting with this particular woman's experience.

Yet Clara's story has some resonance beyond that. Her decision to challenge a wealthy developer under circumstances where she is right but will likely lose her fight offers some insights into how the

powerful react to challenge. Again and again, Clara is patronized, threatened, and disrespected, often with a veneer of courtesy. Her education and social class puts her in a privileged social location, which potentially makes her formidable -- and yet it is evident that her insistence on standing her ground defies expectations. How often do people do that, particularly those who have access to some privilege? Such people, particularly women, generally can be relied on to notice how things are supposed to go, and make that direction seem legitimate and even inevitable.

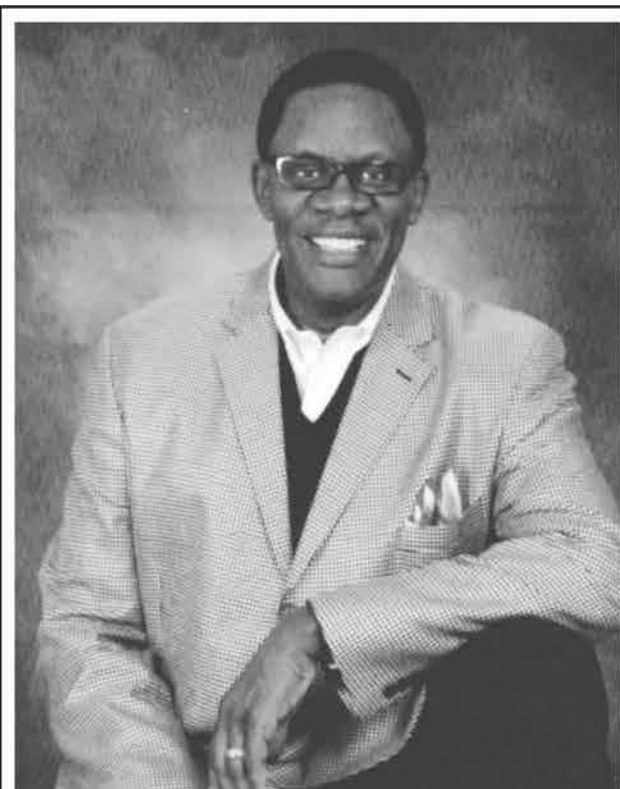
Clara is that unusual person

-- some would say that necessary person -- who makes her decisions based on what she actually wants and, technically, has a right to assert. And this film is also worth watching for a realistic window into how that can play out. First, she is promised that the new building will bear the name of the old one, an offer she evidently finds insulting. Then the developer resorts to more insidious methods of destabilizing Clara's life and interfering with her comfort in her home. Each of the few times she makes a direct response to the developer, she is challenged for being disrespectful. Every time. These challenges

feel increasingly absurd, given the degree of disrespect that has been shown to Clara (including actual shit left in the hallways of her building).

It's worth noticing that Clara never once calls on the authorities. She knows better. She knows where the power really is. Though her refusal to cave worries and exasperates her children (whom the developer also approaches, to her fury), Clara is not foolish, or deluded. She understands what is happening. She simply insists on acting in a way that asserts her own wishes, her own agency,

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