

Dad

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I. Synopsis

A movie based on William Wharton's novel about fathers and sons, an above-average film adaptation from TV's Gary David Goldberg, who wrote and directed the film, it focuses first on the relationship between these two men, neither of whom has paid much attention to the other for years.

"Dad" is a melodramatic plumbing of the relationship between two fathers and sons, starring Jack Lemmon as Jake Tremont, Ted Danson as John Tremont, Olympia Dukakis as Bette, Kevin Spacey, Kathy Baker as Annie and Ethan Hawke as Billy, a university student whom he almost never sees. The movie runs through nearly the entire gamut of emotionally loaded issues, from infirmity and senility to reconciliation and death.

Lemmon plays a 78-year-old retired aeronautics worker and now slipping into contented senility with the help of his tiresome take-over wife, and Danson is his immensely successful stock-trading son/wall street wheeler-dealer and himself the father of a son who is as strange to him as he to Jake, John returns home, to his old house and his aged parents, Danson plays an ambitious businessman forced to put work aside to care for his aging parents, when his mother Bette (Olympia Dukakis), suffers a heart attack.

Her illness is more devastating to Jake than it is to her. Over the years Bette has imposed a rigid routine on her husband, in fact from the moment he gets up to the moment he goes to bed, he does almost nothing for himself. Even his toothbrush is prepared waiting for him by the sink every morning. Bette is more Jake's commandant than his wife, and her relentless, rote approach to life has caused him to become a kind of dim automaton, though Jake

doesn't realize it. Bette tells Jake how much sugar he likes in his coffee. She doles out his pills and drives the car when they go shopping. She forever loves him through her disapproval.

Mr. Lemmon walks as if he could feel his bones, though they don't necessarily hurt. Even his eyeballs seem dim. Bette, who is supposed to be quite so old, walks with purpose on legs that have begun to bow into the shape of a cowboy's. As disturbing as it is, Bette's illness becomes a second chance for Jake. When John arrives, he's shocked by his dad's deterioration and, realizing that his mother will no longer be able to care for him as she has, attempts to help him find a way to take care of himself, but when Jake starts responding to John's new routine like doing the dishes, cooking and washing up for himself, Jake is shamelessly transformed into a cute, geriatric toy. During the course of Jake's rehabilitation, he has his driver's license renewed, and starts to remember that there is more to life than clipping coupons and conking out in front of the tube. The bond between them that both thought was ruptured and gone forever.

The second hour of this two-hour comedy-drama is just that. People smile through tears to the point where a fire hose would seem to be the only way to bring them back to reality. It has too many potentially fatal illnesses and maybe a half-dozen too many scenes in which one family member clutch another family member. "Dad" eventually exceeds one's worst expectations, the first half is quite easy to take, and Mr. Lemmon does a superlative job that is limited only by the tacky material. The rest of "Dad" is composed of a series of harrowing situations about terminal illnesses and family relationships that sound more and more phony as the film becomes more serious.

The film rambles through Jake's recovery from the dementia he lapses into, as when his insensitive doctor (J. T. Walsh) goes against John's wishes and tells him he has cancer. He's lost, reduced to a quivering mass hiding under his bed, beyond the help of his doctors and his family. Then, all of a sudden, he's better, up and about and more chipper than before, leaving us to wonder what the preceding nightmare was building toward. John, who was intending to stay for only a couple of days, has instead set up headquarters for an extended campaign.

And what a wonderful job he must have that he can take this time off to tend to his long-neglected family feelings. But what the movie never deals with are the tensions that might have driven John to distance himself from his family in the first place. When the inevitable tragedies come, they take their expected forms. And because we have at least some susceptibility and human feeling, we give the expected response. What we are responding to, though, is not so much the film as the issues it raises. In that sense, it acts as a trigger to our feelings about our own families, our own mothers and fathers.

Having put us in contact with the real thing, the movie nearly vanishes. Ostensibly, the movie is about how parents and children, particularly fathers and sons, resolve their natural wounds and resentments. But what's there to resolve here? When John's sister, Annie (Kathy Baker, in a role that wastes her talent), asks for his help, he gives it freely, without hesitation or conflict. He's there, hugging and nurturing, as if he were daisy-fresh from a feelings workshop at Esalen. The performances aren't nearly as cloying as they might be. With Jack Lemmon in the role, you might well expect the worst, but he is

uncharacteristically restrained; aside from some unobtrusive makeup and a shaved pate, he underplays the physical side of his performance and, at least in the first section, doesn't use Jake's frailty to play on our sympathies. For this reason, his work is credible, even laudable.

II. Concluding Part

For Dukakis, who puts a tincture of venom in nearly every one of her lines, She's wickedly funny, and in the movie's second half, when flush with the joy of living Jake becomes insufferably jolly, her eye-rolling cynicism is a tonic. The movie's other big role is Danson's, and he's not terrible in it. There are places, even, where you appreciate the lightness of his approach, and his lack of depth almost becomes a virtue. For the rest, he's competent and dull.

Somewhere near the middle of Gary David Goldberg's "Dad," Jake Tremont is about to go into surgery. He's 75 and he's scared and, feeling that he might have only these last few moments left to live, he wants to make some peace with his son, John, who is standing by his bedside." I see men nowadays," Jake says. "They hug. I don't think we've ever hugged."

Not too late to start is the spirit of the son's reply. And the two men embrace. Now am I the only one alive for whom this is a nightmare encountering? Who feels warmed and fuzzed to within an inch of his life?

There's the obligatory American "I love you, dad" scene, but there is a lot more besides. The mother is in charge, but the father suppresses much of his joy for life as a result. Then the mother is taken ill and the son spends some time with his old father, allowing them to develop a close relationship and the father to reassert himself.

There seems to be a requirement of poor communication between people to start with, followed by an apparently easy breakdown of the barriers followed by a newly-found closeness. It is all too simple for real life, but nevertheless numerous issues are raised and sensitively handled without being overly emotional. It is this film's exhausted notion that those three words, boldly stated with a slight catch in the throat, can wipe out lifetimes of disappointment, sorrow and fury.

When Lemmon and Danson are on screen together, without the help of too many snappy one-liners, "Dad" has the air of truth, the special-effects, has provided the way for Mr. Lemmon with makeup that quietly transforms him without calling attention to the transformation, as well as Dukakis's make up is effective. Her performance would be the equal to Mr. Lemmon's were it not for the maddening dialogue. This sounds as if it had been written especially for her, at least for her image as the Bea Arthur of the Big Screen. The supporting cast were also great, Kevin Spacey, who is vivid and funny in the small role of Jake and Bette's son-in-law.

"Dad," which includes material about illness and death that could disturb very young children, Contented Senility and a Tiresome Wife. "Dad" eventually exceeds one's worst expectations but - and this is what makes movie reviewers schizophrenic - the first half is quite easy to take, and Mr. Lemmon does a superlative job that is limited only by the tacky material. Yet the soft-headed screenplay somehow permits the members of the cast to give good performances and, in Mr. Lemmon's case, a performance that is often something of a wonder. "Dad" is the first theatrical feature to be written and directed by Gary David Goldberg, whose previous credits include

the hugely successful, very canny television series "Family Ties," from which sprang Michael J. Fox. Though the source material for "Dad" is a serious novel by William Wharton, who wrote "Birdy," the new film's sensibility is strictly prime time.

III. The Main Cast

Jack Lemmon who played the role of Jake Tremont is a Harvard graduate, burst onto the movie scene as a 1950s Columbia contract player and remained a beloved star until his death in 2001. Born in 1925, the son of a Boston doughnut company executive, Lemmon was educated at Phillips Andover Academy and taught himself to play piano as a teen. Lemmon landed a major role in the 1953 Broadway revival of Room Service, a talent scout for Columbia Pictures convinced the actor to try Hollywood instead. Defying Columbia chief Harry Cohn's demand that he change his last name lest the critics take advantage of it in negative reviews, Lemmon quickly made a positive impression in his first film, the Judy Holliday comic hit It Should Happen to You in 1955, then in 1955, Lemmon became a reliably nimble comic presence at Columbia.

A loan out to Warner Bros. for the smash Mister Roberts Lemmon began his second legendary creative partnership when Wilder cast Walter Matthau opposite him in The Fortune Cookie in 1966. His affection for sentiment in the early '90s with vivid performances as a slightly seedy character in JFK, a fading, high-strung real estate agent in David Mamet's harsh Glengarry Glen Ross, and a truant father in Robert Altman's Short Cuts. Still going strong several years after winning the American Film Institute's life achievement award in 1988, Lemmon proved that older actors could still draw crowds

when he co-starred with Matthau as warring neighbors in the hit comedy Grumpy Old Men and the imaginatively titled sequel Grumpier Old Men.

The two concluded their decades-long, perennially appealing odd couple act with *Out to Sea*, and *The Odd Couple II*. Along with gathering such lifetime laurels as the Kennedy Center Honors and the Screen Actors' Guild trophy, Lemmon also continued to win nominations and awards for his work in such TV dramas as the 1997 version of *12 Angry Men* (inspiring Golden Globe rival Ving Rhames to famously surrender his prize to Lemmon) and *Inherit the Wind*. Though he provided narration for Robert Redford's golf fable *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Lemmon's Emmy-worthy turn as a serenely wise dying professor in *Tuesdays With Morrie* proved to be his final major role and an appropriate end to his stellar career. One year after longtime friend Matthau passed away in July 2000, Lemmon succumbed to cancer on June 27, 2001.

He was survived by his second wife, Felicia Farr (whom he married in 1962), and his two children. While the man behind the character of John played by Ted Danson who is a son of a prominent archaeologist/museum director, American actor Ted Danson grew up near the Navajo reservation in Arizona. He played basketball while at Kent School Connecticut, and then moved on to Stanford University. It was in the process of getting acquainted with an aspiring actress at Stanford that Danson found himself attending his first audition; Danson's first steady TV work was as a slimy villain on the NBC soap opera *Somerset*. Shortly afterward, the actor attained his first film role, as a murdered cop, in *The Onion Field*. After seeing Danson in the movie *Body Heat* and in an episode of the TV series *Taxi*, producer Glen Charles

cast the actor as Sam Malone, ex-sports star and full-time barkeeper and womanizer, on the long-running, well-loved sitcom Cheers. He won Emmys for the 1989-90 and 1992-93 seasons.

Frequently making attempts at film stardom during the 11-season run of Cheers, Danson finally struck gold in *Three Men and a Baby* and its sequel *Three Men and a Little Lady*. Danson's most recent work includes the 1996 starring role in the TV miniseries *Gulliver's Travels* and a co-starring role, opposite his new wife Mary Steenburgen, in the television sit-com *Ink*.