

# In the Land of Dreams

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*Armageddon Time*, 2022. Directed by James Gray, 115 minutes. Distributed by Focus Features.

**D**URING HIS OPENING MONOLOGUE WHILE HOSTING *Saturday Night Live* last November, comedian Dave Chappelle addressed the controversial remarks and reckless social media posts about Jews that Ye (formerly Kanye West) and Kyrie Irving had made earlier that fall. But instead of defusing the controversies, Chappelle's now widely commented-on monologue only inflamed tensions further, highlighting just how difficult it can often be for one group of people who have suffered from persecution to be equally sensitive to another people's historical trauma.

On the heels of Chappelle's dicey monologue comes James Gray's autobiographical movie *Armageddon Time*, which uses the medium of film—as Chappelle had attempted to do through the medium of comedy—to address the thorny intersection between racism and antisemitism in America. Whereas Chappelle, in the eyes of some, appeared to make light of the Holocaust and seemed to lack an understanding of the ways in which many American Jews are still scarred by what our families endured in Europe in the 20th century, *Armageddon Time* conveys some of the gravity of the Jewish situation in the early 20th century. It does so primarily through the character of Aaron Rabinowitz, played charmingly by an endearing, nickname-loving Anthony Hopkins. Rabinowitz, as he tells his grandson Paul Graff (Banks Repeta), is an English Jew of Ukrainian descent, whose parents fled from Eastern Europe due to the increasingly life-endangering persecutions of Jews that were taking place on the continent in the early 20th century. They were fortunate to make it to the United Kingdom, and later to the

United States; their relatives—like so many other millions of Jews—were far less lucky. But just because his family had managed to escape Europe, Rabinowitz explains to Paul, doesn't mean that they have escaped antisemitism. "They hated us then," he says to Paul one night as he's trying to get his grandson to go to bed while also telling him about a pogrom his parents endured in Ukraine. "And they still hate us." Good luck falling asleep after that bedtime story!

Rabinowitz's daughter Esther (Anne Hathaway), an active PTA board member who has aspirations of running for the district school board, had married Irving Graff (Jeremy Strong), a plumber's son who himself is a handyman. They have two sons, Ted (Ryan Sell) and Paul, and—along with other aunts, uncles, and grandparents—are a close-knit family in late-1970s Queens who frequently share large family dinners and Sunday bagel and lox brunches. Rabinowitz is the patriarch who holds the family together, but the family member who holds the movie together is Paul, a red-haired, starry-eyed sixth-grader who dreams of becoming a great artist and who has a knack for getting in trouble in school. Paul likes to sketch caricatures of his teacher in class, creates his own superheroes ("Captain United"—sounds like a plausible comic book character, does it not?), and is infatuated with the art of Kandinsky. Paul's hard-headed parents are worried about him. "His head is in the clouds," he overhears his father complaining to his mother. "He's not living in reality." But his fun-loving grandfather—who calls America "the land of dreams"—is not one to dissuade his grandson from aiming for the life he truly wants. "You can be an artist if you want to; nothing is gonna stop you."

The potentially bigger problem Paul poses for his parents is his friendship with his classmate Johnny Davis (Jaylin Webb). Johnny is Black, and when Gray was growing up many people of his parents' generation were still rather unenlightened (to put it politely) when it came to race and ethnicity. (They call Chinese food "Ching Chang Cho food.") When Paul's parents move him to a new school, Paul's privileged

classmates are openly hostile toward the idea of him having a Black friend, even using the N-word to make their point. Paul's ever-humane grandfather is the only one who doesn't mind; not only does it not bother him but he even tells Paul to stick up for his friend and to "be a mensch" to him when Johnny is inevitably affronted.

The kindling wood is cleanly and clearly laid out for us, and it is obvious that it will only take a small spark to ignite an ugly racial conflagration during the film's dénouement. But the mood of *Armageddon Time*—a reference to the nuclear conflagration Democrats and some liberals feared that then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan would ignite across the globe—is quieter than its more explosive title would suggest. It has less quirkiness and humor than other filmmaker *Bildungsromans* like Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) and fewer fireworks than other movies that have confronted racial conflict in New York, such as Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), notwithstanding that during one scene Paul and his grandfather launch a homemade rocket together. It makes its point about the endurance of prejudice in America in a much more subdued and arguably even more tragic way than Spike Lee's great movie does—though the legendary New York director may very well agree with *Armageddon Time*'s sad assessment of his city's (as well as American society's) troubled record on race.

Anne Hathaway, Banks Repeta, and Anthony Hopkins could (and probably should) all have been nominated for Oscars for their excellent work in this film. Especially impressive was Repeta, a child actor who carries the entire movie essentially by himself—and quite capably so. *Armageddon Time* was unfortunately entirely overlooked by the Academy during this year's Oscars, adding to the mysteries of the Academy's baffling choices. But we should make sure that this poignant, perceptive movie about the complexities of race and religion in America does not slip out of our cultural discourse around these topics anytime soon. .a