

**I N T H E A R T S**

# Neither-nor satire

**Citizen Ruth cleverly mocks both sides of the abortion debate, but does it stake out a position of its own?**

**By Pat Dowell**

**I**f I were a pro-lifer (which is about as likely as Pat Buchanan signing on as editorial writer for *ITT*), I'd feel my side had gotten the short end of a very sharp stick in *Citizen Ruth*. Most people who've seen this cheeky little satire seem to feel it targets both sides of the abortion rights debate, never dropping its hip comic insouciance. It's true that the movie makes fun of both positions' excesses, but its satire is much sharper and more intricate when it's at the expense of the all-American, hymn-singing zealots known as the Baby Savers than when it targets hapless but well-meaning pro-choicers.

The movie follows the fortunes of Ruth (Laura Dern), a scruffy ne'er-do-well whose addiction to paint fumes and other noxious vapors is briefly interrupted by arrest. When it's discovered she's pregnant, she's charged with endangering the life of her fetus, but the judge offers to

reduce the charges against her if she agrees to an abortion (four previous children were taken by the state). Ruth is delighted until her jailhouse encounter with pro-life activists incarcerated for protesting too close to the local abortion provider. They see Ruth's story as an outrage and a public relations opportunity. One of them takes Ruth home to a humble outpost of constrained American comforts.

"We don't really sit in those chairs," explains Gail as she scoops Ruth up out of the Early American living room. Gamely dining al fresco despite their location in an airport flight path, the family consumes meat in vast quantities. It's a home where prayer is bountiful, while communication between wife and husband, not to mention mother and sullen headbanger daughter, is kept to a minimum. Soon, however, the local pro-choice brigade is also at work, leaving Ruth no less bewildered. Life does seem less desperate on the other side, where the movie pokes gentler fun at the foibles of feminists who sing songs to the moon and consort with the clinic security providers, who can be found in their off-hours at the local flesh emporium.

One of many surprising things about *Citizen Ruth* is the star quotient of its cast, which features not only Dern, a once-promising actress sidelined by such monstrous Hollywood piffle as *Jurassic Park*, but such movie, stage and television stalwarts as Kurtwood Smith and Mary Kay Place, playing the Savers who take in Ruth; Swoosie Kurtz as an undercover pro-choice activist; and even Burt Reynolds, as the televangelist head of the Baby Savers. Director and co-screenwriter Alexander Payne must have some talent to keep this cast on its toes and to pry such a sly, underplayed performance out of Reynolds, who has been hamming it up mercilessly on his comeback trail (see *Striptease* and wince).

Reynolds comes into the story when both sides finally grasp the opportunity Ruth represents for their movements. The Baby Savers call a national alert, and the pro-choice side responds in kind. So does local television, of course, and as things escalate, Ruth is buffeted from one opinion to another. "I slept in some dumpsters. Maybe I slept on some babies," she wails after watching a helpful video about "the American holocaust."

Ruth likes the attention—the warmth of a surrogate family and the eventual offers of



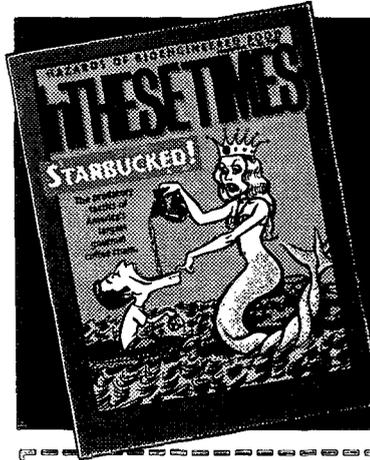
**Citizen Ruth**  
Directed by  
Alexander Payne

money from both sides—but she never grasps the principles involved. But then, the principles are somewhat lost on the activists, too, suggests the screenplay. They are so caught up in the trappings of their causes, both the concrete accessories and the rigidly abstract ideas, that the object of their passion, Ruth herself, matters less and less as the fight heats up.

*Citizen Ruth* has a point. The movie is not simply mocking the various lifestyles on both sides of the abortion rights issue—though it does that with cleverness and abandon—but also lampooning a deeper fact about the American approach to ideas: For many people, politics is a lifestyle choice at least as much as it is a commitment to a cause. Political commitment is often inextricably wrapped up with picking out hairstyles, clothes, bric-a-brac, vacation spots, and, of course, friends (although probably not quite as often or as thoroughly as the makers of *Citizen Ruth* would have us believe). In the movie, when a pro-choice undercover agent sheds her pro-life disguise, it means emerging from a hairstyle she doesn't like, losing those square (in both senses of the word) eyeglasses, and even changing the tone of her voice, her phrasing and her vocabulary. Ruth is the only fit character to lead us on a guided tour of both sides because she belongs to neither, and both of them have difficulty making her their champion once they discover she doesn't quite match their idea of a suitable symbol. In the end, Ruth escapes precisely because she becomes dimly aware of her own distinct identity through the activists' relentless attempts to mold her to theirs.

Ruth herself becomes all but invisible to those who take her up as a cause. So consumed are her would-be protectors with each other that in their final confrontation over Ruth, she is able to sneak out of the clinic and walk, undetected, right past them. She has a bag full of cash and a consciousness that has taken a small step forward—if not toward forming a political or moral opinion about abortion, then at least toward realizing that she has a choice about something in her life. The struggle over her exploitation as a political symbol finally has given Ruth a desire to make a decision for herself, even if it's just to get hold of tape two in a get-rich-quick audio course in real estate.

For all its cleverness in pointing out the mote that distorts the vision of American activists, however, *Citizen Ruth* displays a rather large beam in its own eagle eye of satire. The search for the absurdities and contradictions in political movements is often nothing more than the excavation of excuses for not taking any cause seriously. If the groups supporting various issues suffer from impurities of motive and internal contradictions, this line of thinking goes, why bother with any of them? This convenient cynicism of our times, which applies made-for-TV movie simplicity to the messy complications of real life, is just as much a part of the consumer culture as defining politics by its shopping opportunities. After all, this is a cynicism with a dollar value. No commitment is the most cost-effective of ideological investments: It frees one for more rewarding pursuits, including the pursuit of a career in Hollywood.



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# IN PRINT

## Granny bashing

By Dean Baker

**P**eter Peterson's new book poses the question, "Will America grow up before it grows old?" A better question would be whether it will grow senile. Peterson, who served as secretary of commerce during the Nixon administration, wants to gut Social Security and Medicare, two highly popular and efficient programs that have provided tens of millions of people with a modicum of security in their retirement years. To win support for his agenda, he has published yet another book (his third on the topic) arguing that these programs will bankrupt the nation. The basic story is that the retirement of the baby boom generation will create an unbearable burden on younger workers. He musters a considerable quantity of data to make his case, much of it in impressive color charts. The story he tells is quite scary. Fortunately, it is also not true.

If there are any claims in Peterson's book that are not outright false or seriously misleading, I was unable to find them. Let's start at the beginning. In his first footnote, Peterson describes the intermediate projections of the Social Security Administration (SSA), which are the standard basis of policy analysis for Social Security, as "a fiscally optimistic scenario that assumes modest gains in longevity, buoyant fertility rates, and high levels of net immigration." He then adds that he occasionally uses the administration's "high-cost" scenario to determine what the future will look like if this "optimism proves unfounded."

The SSA's projections cover the next 75 years; by law, the program is required to be "actuarially sound" over that period. These forecasts depend on a host of economic and demographic assumptions, but as far as the long-term viability of the system is concerned, the most important are the growth rates of the population and the economy. For the former, the "buoyant fertility rates" assumed by the SSA average 1.94 over the 75-year period. This is below the current rate of 2.06, and considerably below the 2.46 average of the last 55 years. The "high level of net

immigration" assumed in the projection is 900,000 per year (legal and undocumented immigrants combined), below many estimates of the current level of immigration. Neither the SSA nor Peterson explains why they expect immigration to actually shrink relative to the size of the population.

The SSA's intermediate scenario also assumes that economic growth will be slower over the next 75 years than in any previous period in the history of the nation. The average annual growth rate projected over this period is 1.49 percent. By comparison, the average annual growth rate over the last 75 years was approximately 3.5 percent. If Peterson were trying to present an honest case, in addition to including the "high-cost" scenario (with an average annual growth rate of 0.8 percent), he would have included the SSA's "low-cost" scenario. This set of projections shows the Social Security Fund running a surplus indefinitely, with no change in taxes or benefits whatsoever. But honest discussion is not Peterson's agenda.

His agenda is fairly straightforward: Cut benefits and raise taxes. For Social Security, he proposes raising the retirement age from 65 to 70 by 2015, means-testing benefits and reducing the cost-of-living adjustment. The increase in the retirement age would hit hardest those at physically demanding jobs, who would find it difficult to work through their late 60s. Means-testing sounds progressive—only those below a certain income would be eligible for benefits—but it is a recipe for undermining political support for the program. Means-tested programs, like welfare, soon become identified with the poor, and hence have always been easy political targets. The reduction in the annual cost-of-living adjustment would cause Social Security income to decline each year of a person's retirement. This is certainly a perverse social policy.

Peterson probably didn't bother to check, but taken together his cuts would create a situation in which projected Social Security taxes exceed projected benefits. This means that we would be deducting a "Social Security" tax from people's paychecks in order to pay for the military or the interest on the government bonds that Peterson owns.

If honesty is not a concern for Peterson, neither is logic. Peterson justifies his call for reducing the annual cost-of-living adjustment by citing evi-

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