



Acting Our Age
A Film About Growing Old

a Film by Michal Aviad

This compelling documentary presents an unprecedented contemporary look at women and aging in America. "Acting Our Age" introduces six women, aged 65 to 75, who come from diverse backgrounds: Finnish-American, Black, Lesbian, Latina Jewish and White Anglo-Saxon. Through their stories of personal struggle and triumph, the film dispels the myths and challenges the stereotypes that have defined the image of old women in American culture. "Acting Our Age" allows the women to speak for themselves, and, with unparalleled candor, their interviews tackle subjects that are usually considered taboo for older women. As they speak openly about sexuality, being alone, financial difficulties and dealing with death, their straightforward responses reconstruct our expectations about aging and provided insight into the concerns and lives of today's "real" older women.

"Acting Our Age" examines the effects of aging on women's self-image, their roles in their family and relationships and the place they hold in their communities. The film begins by focusing on the sometimes-sensitive connections between appearance and self-image. The women discuss how changes in their looks have influenced their sense of self and one woman confesses that she recently cancelled a facelift appointment.

While exploring changes in the relationships of older women, "Acting Our Age" conveys the loneliness and isolation faced by some women as children grow up and as some spouses and friends begin to die; it also establishes the possibility of rich and intimate relationships discovered later in life. One of the women is the divorced matriarch of a large extended family while another is the sole caretaker of her bedridden husband; a third describes a fulfilling relationship with her lover of many years and a special friendship with her "New Wave" granddaughter.



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"Acting Our Age" realistically captures the daily struggle for survival that many older women must face. Financial hardship and health problems are common and sometimes debilitating. Interviews are juxtaposed with poignant footage documenting the ways in which women deal with the serious realities of old age; severely arthritic, Phyllis stretches for two hours daily before leaving her home; recently widowed, Lucille is forced to leave her upper-class neighborhood for senior citizen housing.

Finally, this thoughtful documentary looks at the creative ways in which these older women have remained integral participants in their communities. The film reveals their active roles as the executive director of a community center, a suicide hotline counselor, a candidate for a master's degree and a member of the Gray Panthers. There are 16 million women in the U.S. over the age of 64, yet the lives of "real" older women are largely ignored by the mainstream media and are almost invisible to the general public. The most common images in our culture are the ancient wicked hags in fairy tales, the helpless grandmothers in aspirin commercials or the comic old ladies in television shows.

The women in "Acting Our Age" combat media stereotypes; they come from diverse racial, ethnic and class backgrounds and their full and sometimes difficult relationships with mates, family, friends and community cover the entire spectrum. These women share a passion to continue learning and the need to live in active meaningful ways. "Acting Our Age" draws attention to the needs and rights of older women as it documents the full, productive lives they lead. A source of empowerment for all women and senior citizens, this group of ordinary older women demonstrates strength of spirit and dedication to life, which serves as an inspiring example for all ages. "Acting Our Age" is an exceptional addition to all school and public library collections, and is perfect for community and women's groups, senior citizen organizations and courses in Aging, Women Studies, Anthropology, Sociology and Psychology.

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Response to "Acting Our Age"

"Realistic and honest, provocative and sensual—an hour package of role models and friends who can both inspire and warn us about the future..." Gloria Steinem

"A moving film about aging (and life!) that touches all of us. Its women share insights, optimism and courage."
Alice Walker

"'Acting Our Age' vigorously demonstrates that it is possible for many women to overcome the limitations this society—and life—too often imposes on our senior citizens."
Judy Stone, San Francisco Chronicle

"'Acting Our Age' is a moving examination of society's attitudes toward aging and the efforts of older women to retain their sense of self, their sense of sexuality, and perhaps more importantly, their sense of independence."
Daniel Ruth, Chicago Sun-Times

"America's first documentary to look at aging strictly from a woman's perspective, the bittersweet film compares our expectations of what it means to be old with the experiences of six women whose lives contrast sharply with the way they lived in their 40s and 50s." Kathryn Olney, San Francisco Examiner

"Not as much about aging as it is about life...enough drama and surprise for everyone." Sheila Benson, Los Angeles Times

"Rich and wise...exemplary documentary making, putting a human face on a group situation." Laurie Stone, Ms. Magazine

Facts to Consider

*Sixteen million women in the United States are over the age of 64. By the year 2005, there will be 25 million.

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*85% of all surviving spouses over 65 and 80% of the elderly who live alone are women.

*Over 70% of the nearly 4 million persons over 65 living in poverty are women. 35% of older black women, 25% of Hispanic women and 13% of white women over 65 live in poverty. Over half of all women over the age of 65 live on \$550 a month or less.

*Less than one-in-five older women currently receive any pension income. Most women over 65 depend on Social Security as their only significant income.

*Over two million people are providing unpaid care for frail elderly at home; 75% of these caretakers are women.

*Millions of mid-life women have no health insurance at all.

(Sources: Census Bureau and The Older Women's League)

The study guide covers the main topics addressed in the film:

- 1) Appearance and Self-Image
- 2) Old Women & Sexuality
- 3) Isolation & Age Segregation
- 4) Women as Caregivers
- 5) Dying a Good Death
- 6) Old Age & Poverty
- 7) Working Toward Change

Opening Questions for Discussion

Was there a woman in the film who reminded you of someone you know (perhaps yourself)? Did the film help you to see some of the aspects of her life more clearly? Were there problems raised by the film that you've experienced yourself—or expect to encounter later in life? Were there

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issues raised by the women that perhaps you never thought about before?

Do the women in the film represent the average older woman today? Why or why not?

Appearance and Self-Image: Old and Ugly?

Several of the women in "Acting Our Age" express a fear about becoming old: they would be considered unattractive and therefore would be undesirable and unloved. The film points out that particularly in Western culture a women's worth, or sense of worth is tied to her appearance. Traditional standards of beauty include being young and white and these standards are constantly reinforced in advertising and the media. There are few positive media images of old women to combat the fairy-tale of old woman as "wicked witch" or "ugly hag".

- 1) In some cultures old women are greatly admired. For example, many Native American cultures, in both North and South America, reserve central social roles and high status for male and female Elders. Also, in many African societies (especially in pre-colonial times), men and women belonged to "age-sets," organized groups of all the women or men of about the same age. When a group of women makes the transition to the older age-set, they collectively take over important political and ritual positions for the whole community, and gain influence and respect. Discuss how these examples differ from the position and image of old women in American culture.
- 2) Recall the images of the witch from Hansel and Gretel that appear at the beginning of the film. What are some other negative images that our culture attaches to being old and female? How do you think it feels to be represented this way?
- 3) In the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the primary deity is represented as an old man with a white beard. How do you think this portrayal affects women's self-image? What if the deity was represented as an old woman

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with white hair? List some of the positive images that older women can identify with our culture.

- 4) Does aging mean loss of sexual attractiveness for men? Men are perceived as gaining competence or power as they grow older and this can be considered a certain kind of attractiveness. Can you imagine a woman's attractiveness increasing with age? As American women gain more economic and social/political power, will this influence their own sense of attractiveness? Will it influence how they appear to others?
- 5) Have you ever tried to "pass" for younger than you are? How does it feel to be "complimented" that you look young for your age? Do you think middle-aged women who try to look younger are in a sense rejecting or showing contempt for old women?
- 6) How can individuals and society as a whole provide support to old women on the issue of appearance?

Old Women and Sexuality

The sexual life of old women is generally a taboo subject. It is a topic that is avoided or ignored until it has become invisible. One of the most prevalent myths about older women is that they "dry up" sexually after menopause. Actually, women of all cultures can and do enjoy sex and orgasms throughout life. Acting Our Age explores the sexuality of women from several perspectives.

-Many older women like Phyllis Metal feel that their sex life is better than when they were younger. This may be due in part to a better understanding of their own sexuality. However, older heterosexual women who wish to be sexually active may find themselves without partners. The life expectancy for men is shorter than for women and while the relationships of older men and younger women is socially sanctioned, old women and young men as coupled are traditionally not acceptable. The combination of these and other factors leaves women without male partners later in life.

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-For Shevy Healy, lesbianism and loving women is "a wonderful choice" for expressing her sexuality. Many lesbians feel that growing old does not have the same stigma in the lesbian community as it does in the heterosexual world and so sexual attractiveness doesn't diminish with age.

-Some older women find that celibacy is a positive option. For many women of all ages, freedom from maintaining a sexual relationship can offer the opportunity to more fully explore other friendships and relationships.

- 1) Before viewing the film, what ideas did you have regarding the sexuality of older women? Have you ever spoken to an older woman about her sexuality? Why is the sexuality of older women not talked about? How do you feel about the comments made by the women in the film regarding their sexuality?
- 2) How can a woman overcome some of the social "rules" regarding her sexuality? Do women need to talk with each other or organize regarding this issue?
- 3) Do you think society should be changing its attitudes toward old women and sexuality? What can be done to promote change? Discuss attitudes that are currently changing.

Isolation and Age Segregation

For diverse reasons, many older women find themselves living alone at the end of their lives. One major reason is life expectancy: women live long after the deaths of husbands, friends and intimates. Of people over the age of 65, there are 5 times as many widows as widowers. And while widowers tend to remarry younger women, most widows do not remarry at all. Finally, an increasingly mobile society makes it difficult for a woman to be near her family. An older woman who cannot live with her extended family, or chooses not to, may find herself isolated and without community support. One alternative to being alone is to move into a retirement community of seniors-only housing. But as Enola Maxwell points out, this sort of age-segregated housing can mean a different type of isolation: "We are moving into these homes that only seniors can live in and some of your grandchildren can't

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even visit you. You really can't know what's happening in the world, you can't be part of anything. You can't grow".

- 1) How well do you think a lifetime as a wife and mother prepares a woman for being on her own at age sixty?
- 2) What social, family or personal pressures may make an older woman "choose" living alone, sometimes in a city far from her family? What pressures may separate younger women from their mothers, grandmothers or just older women in general? Do younger women have anything to gain from trying to bridge this gap?
- 3) Discuss the pros and cons of age segregation in housing, neighborhoods, senior centers and convalescent homes. Consider class and family differences in this discussion. For example, retirement communities are available only to the affluent, yet they offer important amenities, which are not found in seniors-only public housing. Women like Enola Maxwell have family to support and so have no trouble integrating with people of all ages. What about women without nieces, nephews or grandchildren—how do they find alternative age-integrating experiences? How many generations of family are available to you in your daily life?

Women as Caregivers

Eighty to ninety percent of the 5 million disabled people who live at home are cared for by family members. The vast majority of the caretakers are women; most of these, older women. The average age of a wife caring for a husband is 65; thirty percent are over 74. About 1/3 of these caregivers are living in poverty and close to 1/2 of them are in poor health themselves. Like Carmen Morales in the film there are many women who, after they raise their children, spend their later years caring for husbands, siblings, parents.

- 1) Do you think it's true that women have the primary responsibility for caring for disabled family members? If true, why do you think women fill this role? Who performs this function in your family?

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2) It's been suggested that the medical profession expects women to perform the function of primary care—that in effect women have become unpaid health care workers and a necessary part of the health care system. Discuss changes in the U.S. health care system which could help alleviate the financial/emotional burden of women caring for sick family members. What changes can be made in government policy, insurance systems, or corporate "compassionate leaves?"

3) Most people in the U.S. would find extended care in nursing homes financially impossible and psychologically devastating. If there were adequate public support for these institutions, would that be the best option for you or your elderly family members? Why or why not?

4) As full-time careers become the norm for women, who will take on the primary role of caretaker for the elderly?

Dying a Good Death

Eighty percent of the elderly living alone are women and there are four times as many women in nursing homes as men. Shevy Healy comments that her mother died "a terrible death" in a convalescent home. She was cared for by strangers and had no control over her environment. Healey says, "I will work the best I know how to provide for myself a support system, a way of living that gives me something that sustains me inwardly so that when I become frail I don't have to die the way my mother did."

1) Why do you think there are more women in nursing homes than men?

2) In many cultures death and dying are integrated with daily life—death is expected and accepted. Community networks, including children, take part in support of the dying, preparations for death and mourning. Why is death and dying in our culture an isolating, "hidden" experience? How can we change our society to make the process of death and dying a more meaningful and positive part of our lives?

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How would you change the dying process for one of your close friends or relatives?

3) "Living wills" are one method used to help ensure that the dying have some control over their death. Through a living will, an individual may leave instructions regarding how they would like to be cared for if they are close to death and are unable to make decisions regarding their care. For example, a living will may indicate the desire to die a natural death, with no effort to prolong life through technology. Discuss how instituting things like hospice care and living wills can offer the dying better control over their own deaths? Do you know anyone who has utilized a hospice as an alternative to hospitalization or home care?

Old Age and Poverty

An estimated 30% of all elders live in poverty or are "economically vulnerable"—living within \$5000 of the official poverty line and having no assets. However, old people most often living in poverty are women and people of color. Actually, the median income for women over 65 is only 60% of that for men of the same age and that of blacks is just 60% of white elders. Eighty percent of old black men and 90% of old black women living alone are living in poverty or are economically vulnerable. There are many factors that contribute to these statistics. For example, women still earn only 63% of the wages men earn. Later, this disparity in income affects the total social security benefits available to the older woman. Also, many women interrupt their careers to raise children. Some women spend years out of the work force, which can mean loss of tenure at their jobs and reduced pension benefits. Finally, women—particularly women of color—are more likely than men to work in low-wage jobs (i.e. domestic work) which have no pension plans or health insurance at all.

1) Do you think older people need more or less money to survive than young people? Have you thought about what your income would be if you retire at 65? Do you have a plan for adjusting your lifestyle to fit that income?



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2) What are some social policy changes that need to be made to address the economic difficulties of older women and people of color?

Working Toward Change

"I don't think I'll ever retire from seeking justice and equality as long as I live and can get one foot before the other and can raise my voice. I will never retire from that." Enola Maxwell

"Most of all I want to be out there. I want to be participating in the world. I want to have my say." Shevy Healy

Acting Our Age points out that the problems of older women differ from those of older men and it explores particular ways in which old women are victimized in terms of self-esteem, age segregation, economic hardship, lack of appropriate health care and isolation. The six women in Acting Our Age are eager to change their lives for the better and are active in organizations which address the problems faced by old women in our society.

1) Do you think that the efforts made by the women in the film actually improve their lives? Do you think change is more likely to take place if the problems of older women are addressed by society as a whole? Should society be responsible for the concerns of older women?

2) Of all the issues raised in Acting Our Age, which would you most like to see addressed in some public action? Can you imagine or create a plan for public action or legislation which would:

- Change the imagery of old women in a positive direction?
- Make social isolation of old women a community concern?
- End job discrimination against old people, people of color, the disabled and women?
- Provide adequate health care for old women? Long-term care?
- Make sure that death with dignity is assured for all?

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-Eliminate poverty as a threat and as a reality in the lives of old women?

Footnotes:

1. David I. Kertzer and Oker B.B. Madison, "Women's Age-Set Systems in Africa: The Latuka of Southern Sudan"
2. Tish Sommers and Laurie Shields, "Who Are the Caregivers?", in *Women Take Care*, ed. Tish Sommers and Laurie Shields
3. Figures are based on 1985 census. Source: Patricia Horn, "Elders on the Edge," in *Dollars and Sense*, Jan/Feb, 1988.

Credits

Producer/Director.....Michal Aviad
Director of Photography.....Frances Reid
Editor.....Deborah Hoffman
Associate Producers.....Debra Chasnoff, Barbara Tomash
Co-writer.....Deborah Rosenfelt
Sound.....Sara Chin

58 minutes Color 1987
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Resources

Suggested Reading

Adelman, Marcy (ed.) Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians. Boston: Alyson Publ. 1986

Alexander, Jo, Debi Barrow, Lisa Dimitrovich, Margareta Donnelly, Cheryl McLean (eds.) Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women. Corvallis, Oregon: Calyx Books. 1986

Brown, Judith K. (ed.), In Her Prime: A New View of Middle-Aged Women. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey. 1985.
Cross-cultural studies of mid-life women.

Doress, Paula Brown, Diana Laskin Siegal and the Midlife and Older Women Book Project, Ourselves, Growing Older: Women Aging with Knowledge and Power. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster. 1987

Laird, Carobeth. Limbo.

MacDonald, Barbara and Cynthia Rich, Look Me in the Eye. San Francisco: Spinster's Ink. 1983

Myerhoff, Barbara. Number Our Days. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster. 1978

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Sommers, Tish and Laurie Shields, *Women Take Care: The Consequences of Caregiving in Today's Society*. Gainesville, Florida: Triad Publ. 1987

Walker, Barbara G. *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power*. San Francisco: Harper & Row. 1985

Wilson, Emily Herring. *Older Black Women of the South*. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press. 1983

Filmography of related titles available from Direct Cinema:

Dorothy Molter: *Living in the Boundary Waters*
Number Our Days
There Were Times, Dear
In Her Own Time
Contrary Warriors

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Resource Organizations

For information on women and aging or the issues confronting older women contact:

The Gray Panthers, 311 S. Juniper St., Suite 601, Philadelphia, PA 19107 (215) 545-6555. A national organization dedicated to uniting the efforts of young and old in political work on the issues of poverty, discrimination and social welfare.
www.graypanthers.org

National Coalition on Aging (NCOA), 600 Maryland Ave. SW, West Wing 100, Washington, D.C. 20024. Advocacy organization working in the areas of senior housing, adult day care, rural elders and older workers.

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www.ncoa.org

National Organization for Women (NOW) Task Force on Older Women, 1401 New York Ave. NW, Suite 800, Washington, D.C. 20005. Provides information and advocacy on political/economic issues of aging.

www.now.org

The Older Women's League (OWL), 730 11th St. NW, Suite 300, Washington, D.C. 20001. A lobbying organization whose efforts include fighting for a national health plan and against age discrimination and Social Security budget cuts.

<http://www.social.com/health/nhic/data/hr1700/hr1789.html>

Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), 206 W. 14th St., New York, NY 10011. Publishes a resource list of lesbian and gay aging groups.

www.sageusa.org

Women's Studies Programs at most local colleges or universities have courses on Women and Aging and resource centers.

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