



'Can Hitler Happen Here?': Film Review

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Courtesy of Frederic Fasano

THE BOTTOM LINE

A descent-into-madness that's notable for its unusual protagonist and photography.

OPENS

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A 75 year-old recluse tries to keep others out of her home in Saskia Rifkin's psychodrama.

See it on a marquee, and you might expect Saskia Rifkin's *Can Hitler Happen Here?* to be a panicked documentary asking if America's dire current state is likely to lead to true Fascism. It's nothing of the sort. Rather, the anachronistic picture — artfully shot by Frederic Fasano on digital black and white in a 4:3 aspect ratio — concerns a sort of Manhattan *Grey Gardens* scenario minus the camp and weird camaraderie: Elderly Miriam Kohen (Laura Esterman) lives alone in her Upper East Side townhouse convinced that the world is out to get her. The reliability of her narration is, of course, the point of Rifkin's feature, which is more suited to arthouses than many of the no-budget indies that fill them these days. Though its appeal will be limited, many in the audience will be taken with this self-consciously provocative film.

Stage vet Esterman ranges from wild-eyed to calmly canny as Miriam, an artist and heir to a large fortune who lives like a squatter in her giant old home. Posh neighbors are aghast, as one would expect — especially Cynthia and Colby Porter (Tracy Shayne and John Pirikis), who have cause more serious than snobbery for their complaints: Miriam's neglect threatens the structure of their own house and routinely floods their basement.

Where Cynthia exhibits some familiar passive-aggressive neighborliness, Colby's a stranger case: A domineering sort who can't wait to inherit his wife's fortune, he secretly hopes to buy Miriam's house and a third, then morph them into an unholy mega-manse that he can sell for a fortune.

Colby also belongs to a gay sex club, where he cavorts with various social workers and city bureaucrats who conspire to make Miriam's life miserable. Or at least, that's what Miriam believes



check on her just as the real estate interest in her house heats up. At the film's start, we see her being wheeled into a psychiatric ward and questioned, but most of the film occurs in flashback, as she recounts (in a bit too much actorly voiceover) how she was slowly extracted from her refuge.

Working a good deal of her career in the visual arts, Rifkin has helped celebrated photographer Gregory Crewdson make his big, meticulous pictures that suggest dark, mysterious narratives. Catherine May Levin's hothouse screenplay could be the story behind a photo like that, taking us into the mind of a bedraggled, alcoholic woman who peers out the window of what should be a splendid house. Esterman's robust performance keeps ridiculousness at bay: Even as Miriam's increasingly convoluted conspiracy theories grow hard to accept, the movie is grounded by her rock-solid insistence on autonomy and dignity — even if it's a dignity few outsiders would recognize as such.

Production company: Pilgrims 7

Cast: Laura Esterman, Tracy Shayne, John Pirkis, Alexander Quiroga, Mark McCullough Thomas, Bernadette Quigley, Sean Cullen

Director-Producer: Saskia Rifkin

Screenwriter-Executive producer: Catherine May Levin

Director of photography: Frederic Fasano

Production designer: Jesika Farkas

Costume designer: Linda Belkebir

Editor: Dave Rock

Composer: Michael A. Levine

Casting director: Judy Henderson

73 minutes