

A FILM BY SARAH FRIEDLAND

FAMILIAR TOUCH



FAMILIAR TOUCH

A FILM BY SARAH FRIEDLAND

OFFICIAL WEBSITE
OFFICIAL STILLS

90 MINS. / DRAMA / UNITED STATES / ENGLISH / 2024

CONTACT

PUBLICITY REQUESTS

NEW YORK

Andrea Torres, Film Forum
andrea@filmforum.org

NATIONAL / LOS ANGELES

Courtney Ott and Emilie Spiegel, Cinetic Marketing
familiartouch@cineticmedia.com

REGIONAL

Elizabeth Arnott, Music Box Films
earnott@musicboxfilms.com

BOOKING REQUESTS

Kyle Westphal
kwestphal@musicboxfilms.com

MARKETING REQUESTS

Cat Sullivan
csullivan@musicboxfilms.com

LOGLINE

A sensitive coming-of-old-age film that follows an older woman's transition into assisted living as she navigates her relationship with herself, her caregivers, and her family amidst her shifting memories and desires.

SUMMARY

Ruth (Kathleen Chalfant), a retired cook, prepares breakfast in her sunny and cozy kitchen – a dish she seems to have made many times before, although small and puzzling errors now punctuate her comfortable routine. When her son (H. Jon Benjamin) arrives to dine with her, she mistakes him for a suitor. Their “date” takes them to an assisted living facility, which Ruth does not remember that she had previously selected for herself. Among her fellow memory care residents, Ruth feels lost and adrift, certain she has found herself somewhere she does not belong. As she slowly begins to accept the warmth and support of care workers Vanessa (Carolyn Michelle) and Brian (Andy McQueen), she finds new ways to ground herself in her body, even as her mind embarks on a journey all its own. Writer-director Sarah Friedland's coming-of-old-age feature compassionately follows the winding path of octogenarian Ruth's shifting memories and desires while remaining rooted in her sage perspective.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

FAMILIAR TOUCH reimagines the coming-of-age genre to illuminate the experience of one older woman as she transitions into assisted living. It experiments with the markers of the genre to consider how we are all, always, coming of age. Narratives of older adults are peripheral in our culture, as if desire, dreams, and agency decay long before our bodies and minds do. As feminist scholar Lynne Segal writes, "as we age, changing year on year, we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been, creating a type of temporal vertigo and rendering us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age." Our film resides in that vertigo, as our protagonist Ruth not only disavows the roles expected of her — Mother, Patient, Old Lady — but her “appropriate” age identity, sliding between feeling 85 and 25. As an anti-ageist character study, FAMILIAR TOUCH locates its perspective not with family members who look upon Ruth, but with Ruth looking at herself.

Drawing on my background as a choreographer and dance-filmmaker, FAMILIAR TOUCH is told through the precise and quotidian choreography of Ruth, our protagonist, and the physical language of caregiving.

—Sarah Friedland



Q&A WITH DIRECTOR SARAH FRIEDLAND & ACTOR KATHLEEN CHALFANT

WHY DID YOU WANT TO MAKE THIS FILM?

Sarah Friedland: My paternal grandmother was a poetry editor, artist, and left-wing Jewish intellectual — someone who raised my family to really value verbal expression. When she developed dementia and became nonverbal, my family started speaking about her as if she were no longer there.

Of course, they were grieving this loss that they felt. But when I would visit her in memory care, she was so present in other ways — specifically, in embodied ways. She would rock, she would tap certain rhythms. This person I loved was still very much there.

Cut to many years later: I was working in film/TV production in New York City and felt like I was learning a lot about filmmaking, but not so much about people outside of a set. I answered an ad for a sculptor with dementia who needed someone to be part-assistant, part-caregiver. That led to me working for a caregiving agency that had a lot of artists and creative clients.

This role changed everything that I thought I knew about aging and identity. My clients saw me as their friend, their assistant, their sister, depending on the day. That kind of fluidity of age identity really made me think about just how slippery it is not just for older adults, but for all of us.

KATHLEEN, WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THIS PROJECT?

Kathleen Chalfant: When I read the script, I wanted very much to do it because my best friend, the playwright Sybille Pearson, has dementia. There were many things in the script that reminded me of what Sybille was going through. One was this question of the malleability of age and our ideas about age, which was something that very much was happening with Sybille. So there was a way in which I wanted to do this as a tribute to her and to thank her. The great tragedy when someone disappears like this is that when you're very close friends, you know each other's secrets. Now, only one of us knows the secrets.

HOW DID THE FILM EVOLVE FROM IDEA TO SCRIPT – AND THEN TO A GREATER PROJECT THAT INCLUDED RESIDENTS OF A RETIREMENT COMMUNITY?

Friedland: The earliest draft read more like a movement score. It really was just imagining this woman moving — the differences between her moving in her own home and her moving in the new space of the assisted living facility. As I got deeper into the world of creative aging and working with older adults, I realized that it had to be made as an intergenerational production.

Villa Gardens was founded by Ethel Percy Andrus, who was the founder of the AARP and California's first female high school principal. Villa Gardens' inception 90 years ago was as this sort of collectivist retirement home for female educators. Because of that history, there's still a culture of lifelong learning there that made this possible.

HOW DID THE VILLA GARDENS RESIDENTS PARTICIPATE IN MAKING THE FILM?

Friedland: Prior to filming, we facilitated a five-week-long filmmaking workshop for the residents to make their own films. During feature production, we had residents who acted, were in the production design department, did background casting, worked with the camera department, helped our producers ... residents were involved in every department, and many of the workers that you see on screen are real care workers at the facility.

DESCRIBE RUTH AND HOW YOU DEVELOPED THE CHARACTER.

Friedland: She's a composite of many people for me, starting with my grandmother — and then the greatest joy was seeing Kathy (Chalfant) embody her, and she became all of those people and then someone else.

A big part of the character is her connection to making and writing and how that comes through in her cooking. We spent a lot of time with Mollie Katzen, author of the Moosewood Cookbook, talking about her generation of female cooks in America and the coincidence of their coming of age with the counterculture of the '60s. Components of Ruth also come from the little moments with clients that I had when I was a caregiver. And part of that was trying to think about Ruth in terms of her body, gestures, and desires, and how she likes to be touched and wants to touch.

Another component was thinking about the women who came of age in this moment of a feminist revolution. What does it then feel like to lose a certain amount of autonomy later in life? Who is caring for these women, and who is attending to their self-expression?

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WORKING WITH SARAH AS A DIRECTOR?

Chalfant: We had a wonderful time. When you act in something on film — even more than in the theater — you're entirely dependent upon the eye of the seer, the director. With Sarah, I always felt safe and that what she said about what she saw was true, and if there were things about which we disagreed, we could always talk about it. It was an entirely open and collaborative process.

Friedland: This is my first feature, and the shorts that I've made have largely been with dancers and non-professional actors. Kathy is the first professional actor that I've directed, and to have that first experience with her is extraordinary. She always made me feel trusted, and at the same time mentored me.

To give one example, there was a moment where I had doubts about a line I had written, and I was considering rewriting it on set. Kathy whispered in my ear, "You know, I've met the screenwriter of this film, and I think she knows what she's doing." *(Laughs)*

THE FILM IS TOLD ENTIRELY FROM RUTH'S PERSPECTIVE. WHY WAS THAT IMPORTANT?

Friedland: So many of the films that exist around aging are from the perspective of a loved one and never from the perspective of the person themselves. And I find that the perspective of the adult child or the partner usually ends up creating a narrative of decline — they are grieving the "disappearance" or the "loss" of the person they love.

I didn't want to minimize the grief of loved ones, but I didn't think it really captured the experience of the person going through it.

That's why I turned to the coming-of-age genre — because, for youth, we don't doubt this idea at all. We say that a young person transforms, they change, they come of age, but they are still themselves. I wanted to co-opt the coming-of-age genre for older adults to attend to how Ruth's sense of self continues despite this transformation. And to do that, it had to be from her perspective.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WORKING AND ACTING ALONGSIDE THE VILLA GARDENS RESIDENTS?

Chalfant: The people there are extraordinary. We spent a lot of time talking about people's lives — the lives they'd lived and, in some cases, the lives they continue to live from the facility. It was comforting in a way, too, because I'm going to be 80 in January, and my husband is 84. We both are fine and it seems unlikely that we'll go to such a facility ... but it's possible. I just was taken by the vitality of the community, because my experience of such places has always been as the caregiver. So this was eye-opening, and also a reminder of this question of the malleability of our idea of age.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN BY MAKING THIS FILM?

Friedland: The biggest thing is that I want to keep working with actors! I had such a great experience with Kathy, Carolyn Michelle, Andy McQueen, and H. Jon Benjamin. The other thing is I'm coming from a background making dance films — my work looks at social choreographies and the movement of everyday life — and this was one step in trying to adapt movement-based filmmaking into a more narrative form.

Chalfant: I have thought for a long time that the secret to successful acting is a kind of terminal relaxation. You have to be able to give yourself to whoever it is that you're playing. In a play, it's a long process, because you have a long time with the script — I think of it as enveloping the words, so that you open your mouth and the character comes out. You don't think about it, it's like downhill racing.

It's a little bit more difficult in film, so what you need to do is somehow figure out how to access this radical relaxation for what will be five minutes of work with incredible distractions all the time. And because of the way Sarah makes movies, it was possible to do it. I also learned something about how it must feel for my friend — like being in a dream all the time over which you have no control.

HOW DID THE CREATIVE TEAM FOR FAMILIAR TOUCH SUPPORT YOUR VISION?

Friedland: Our DP and production designer, Gabe Elder and Stephanie Cohen — I've made all my short films with them, and we've really had the chance to develop a shared language together. The visual language of the film — how the production design and the cinematography interact — was planned in conversation with the two of them, and they've been deeply involved for over eight years in trying to make this.

I met our producers, Alexandra Byer and Matt Thurm, after the script went through the Berlinale Talents Script Station. I knew that they were the right people for this film after they both gave me the same critical note on the script (independent of each other). This film has taken years to make, and they've weathered many storms with me.

In terms of the other cast members, Carolyn Michelle I met when I was (director) Steve McQueen's assistant. I wrote Vanessa for her. Our casting director had seen Andy McQueen in an audition several years ago and had been waiting for the right role to cast him in. With H. Jon Benjamin, we clicked over our shared lineage of Jewish peddlers and it just felt right from the beginning.

I worked with two editors, Aacharee "Ohm" Ungsriwong and Kate Abernathy. Ohm really helped find the rhythm and the pacing of the film, while Kate helped me see what was needed to stay in Ruth's perspective. I could go on ... we had an extraordinary crew.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE AUDIENCES TO COME AWAY WITH AFTER SEEING FAMILIAR TOUCH?

Friedland: Discussions of aging and our care needs feel very taboo both in American society and the world over. I think it has everything to do with ageism and capitalism: we live in a society that sees older adults as no longer valuable as human beings as soon as they stop working. The side effect of this is devaluing the people who care for them. Care work is not seen as a skilled profession in this country and is not compensated or protected as such.

I hope that people will see this film and think about the dignity of older adults and value the care labor that supports them. With the current care infrastructure in this country — there is no universal older adult care — most people don't have choices. Ruth's care in the film is of a level that probably only one or two percent of Americans can access. The lack of care choices for aging adults and lack of support for care workers unfortunately rings true in many places beyond the US, too. I hope our film can help people have conversations about their own wishes for how they're cared for as they age, because it's not a conversation we're accustomed to having.

A GUIDE FOR MEDIA COVERING FAMILIAR TOUCH

COURTESY OF CARING ACROSS GENERATIONS

The words the media uses to describe aging, illness, disability and care matter. This guide includes some best practices for writing about care-related issues in a way that ensures respect and dignity for people who give and receive care.

Use the following words or phrases to describe FAMILIAR TOUCH characters who provide care:

Steve **“caregiver” or “family caregiver”**

Vanessa **“care worker” or “direct care worker”**

Brian

Other preferred terms to use when discussing care-related themes:

Use This	Instead of This
Older adult or aging adult	Elderly or senior
Person with dementia or person with memory loss	Senile or “losing it”
Disabled person <i>Note: Use “autistic person” when referring to autistic people</i>	Person with a disability
Caregiver	Caretaker
Care responsibility or care needs	Care as a burden

Avoid describing care as an individual “burden.” Using the word “burden” or similar words to describe care responsibilities can often be othering and harmful to the people who receive the care, and diminishes their agency. “Burden” overlooks the complexities of caregiving, which can often feel like an isolating challenge given a lack of systemic support in the U.S. (such as childcare, paid leave and aging and disability care), but can also be very rewarding and meaningful. Most people who provide care do not see the work as simply a burden.

Use asset framing and highlight solutions. Defining people solely by their challenges – deficit-framing – can stigmatize people, promote harmful stereotypes, and diminish hope that things can change. Instead, mention a person’s care needs – for themselves or for others – as one aspect of someone’s lived experience. For example:

Deficit framing: *Nina, a caregiver for her senile mother and single mom to a young son, faces nearly impossible challenges when it comes to balancing work and care.*

Asset framing: *Nina is a teacher, single mom to a young son, and caregiver to her mother who has dementia. She loves her job and giving back to her community, but sometimes it’s difficult.*

For more information: www.caringacrossgenerations.org



CREATIVE TEAM

SARAH FRIEDLAND (Writer/Director) is a filmmaker and choreographer working at the intersection of moving images and moving bodies. Her work has been presented in festivals and art spaces including the New York Film Festival, New Directors/New Films, Mubi, MoMA and the Performa19 Biennial. Sarah graduated from Brown University's department of Modern Culture and Media and started her career assisting filmmakers including Steve McQueen, Mike S. Ryan, and Kelly Reichardt. From 2021 - 2022, she was both a Pina Bausch Fellow for Choreography and a NYSCA/NYFA Fellow in Film/Video, and was named to Filmmaker Magazine's 25 New Faces of Independent Film in 2023. Her short film trilogy, MOVEMENT EXERCISES, is distributed by Video Data Bank. Sarah has been working in creative aging for the last eight years, as a caregiver to artists with dementia, and as a teaching artist facilitating intergenerational films and workshops for older adults. FAMILIAR TOUCH is her debut feature film.

www.motionandpictures.com

KATHLEEN CHALFANT (Ruth) has spent more than five decades performing on stage, screen, and TV. She is perhaps best known for her portrayal of Vivian Bearing in the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, WIT, for which she received Obie, Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel, Outer Critics Circle, and Ovation awards. Other critically acclaimed roles include Hannah Pitt/Ethel Rosenberg in the original cast of Tony Kushner's groundbreaking ANGELS IN AMERICA, receiving nominations for both the Tony and Drama Desk Awards. Notable film credits include KINSEY, DUPLICITY, and THE LAST DAYS OF DISCO, among many others. Her beloved TV characters include playing Margaret Butler on Showtime's THE AFFAIR, as well as roles in HOUSE OF CARDS, THE AMERICANS, MADAME SECRETARY, ELEMENTARY, HIGH MAINTENANCE, and all of the various LAW AND ORDERS. Kathleen has collaborated with acclaimed experimental filmmakers and choreographers, including Yvonne Rainer, Barbara Hammer, and Pam Tanowitz.

CAROLYN MICHELLE (Vanessa) is best known for her recurring roles in Showtime's THE CHI and Netflix's RUSSIAN DOLL. Other TV credits include USA's COLONY, Netflix's HOUSE OF CARDS, OWN's CHERISH THE DAY as well as episodes on LAW AND ORDER, Marvel's LUKE CAGE, and HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER.

ANDY MCQUEEN (Brian) can currently be seen playing 'Jay' in Damon Lindelof/Tara Hernandez's Peacock series MRS. DAVIS, opposite Betty Gilpin. Other notable roles include 'Carlos Singh' in the hit Netflix series OUTER BANKS, and in HBO series STATION ELEVEN and FAHRENHEIT 451 opposite Michael B. Jordan and Michael Shannon.

H. JON BENJAMIN (Steve) is "Sterling Archer," the lead voice of the FX animated series ARCHER, as well as the lead voice of BOB's BURGERS on Fox. He was previously an executive producer and the star of the Comedy Central series JON BENJAMIN HAS A VAN. He can also be seen on the Netflix series MASTER OF NONE and WET HOT AMERICAN SUMMER: FIRST DAY OF CAMP.

ALEXANDRA BYER (Producer) is a Brooklyn-based producer and co-founder of Rathaus Films. She produced Noah Pritzker's EX-HUSBANDS, Tim Sutton's FUNNY FACE (Gravitas Ventures), Cedric Cheung-Lau's debut film THE MOUNTAINS ARE A DREAM THAT CALL TO ME (Criterion Channel), Diana Peralta's DE LO MIO (HBO/Criterion Channel), Tom Quinn's COLEWELL (Gravitas Ventures), Matt Porterfield's SOLLERS POINT (Oscilloscope Laboratories), and Sutton's DARK NIGHT (Arbelos Films). She was nominated for the John Cassavetes Award at the 2020 Independent Spirit Awards for her work on COLEWELL.

MATTHEW THURM (Producer) is an Emmy-Nominated producer whose films have played festivals such as Venice, Sundance, and Berlin, and have garnered five Independent Spirit Award nominations and seven NAACP Image Award nominations. Thurm co-produced CROWN HEIGHTS (Amazon Studios) by Matt Ruskin, which won the Audience Award at Sundance. Other features include H. by Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia, 11:55 by Ari Issler and Ben Synder, COLEWELL by Tom Quinn (for which Thurm was nominated for the John Cassavetes Award) and SYLVIE'S LOVE (Amazon Studios) by Eugene Ashe, starring Tessa Thompson, which premiered in US Dramatic Competition at Sundance 2020.

CAST

Ruth	Kathleen Chalfant
Vanessa	Carolyn Michelle
Brian	Andy McQueen
Steve	H. Jon Benjamin

CREW

Writer/Director	Sarah Friedland
Producers	Alexandra Byer, Matthew Thurm, Sarah Friedland
Cinematographer	Gabe. C Elder
Production Designer	Stephanie Osin Cohen
Editor	Aacharee “Ohm” Ungsriwong
Casting Director	Betsy Fippinger
Sound Designer	Eli Cohn
Creative Advisor and Food Consultant	Mollie Katzen



ABOUT MUSIC BOX FILMS

Music Box Films is the prestigious North American distributor of acclaimed international, independent, and documentary feature films. Recent releases include *Mountains*, the debut feature from Monica Sorelle, who took home the Independent Spirit Awards “Someone to Watch” Award, and *In the Summers*, Alessandra Lacorazza’s heartfelt and subtly powerful coming-of-age directorial debut that won the two top prizes in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at Sundance. Recent releases include the Cannes Directors’ Fortnight baseball comedy *Eephus* by Carson Lund, and *Ghost Trail*, Jonathan Millet’s tense and haunting revenge thriller that premiered at Cannes Film Festival.

Since its formation in 2007, Music Box Films has distributed award-winning films and art-house favorites that include Academy Award winner *Ida*, *Meru* (from Oscar-winning filmmakers Jimmy Chin and E. Chai Vaserhelyi), Christian Petzold’s *Transit*, the popular Swedish comedy *A Man Called Ove*, and the original *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Music Box Films is independently owned and operated by the Southport Music Box Corporation, which also owns and operates the Music Box Theatre, Chicago’s premier venue for independent and foreign films. For more information, visit www.musicboxfilms.com.

CONTACT

PUBLICITY REQUESTS

NEW YORK

Andrea Torres, Film Forum
andrea@filmforum.org

NATIONAL / LOS ANGELES

Courtney Ott and Emilie Spiegel, Cinetic Marketing
familiartouch@cineticmedia.com

REGIONAL

Elizabeth Arnott, Music Box Films
earnott@musicboxfilms.com

BOOKING REQUESTS

Kyle Westphal
kwestphal@musicboxfilms.com

MARKETING REQUESTS

Cat Sullivan
csullivan@musicboxfilms.com