

REEL CULTURE

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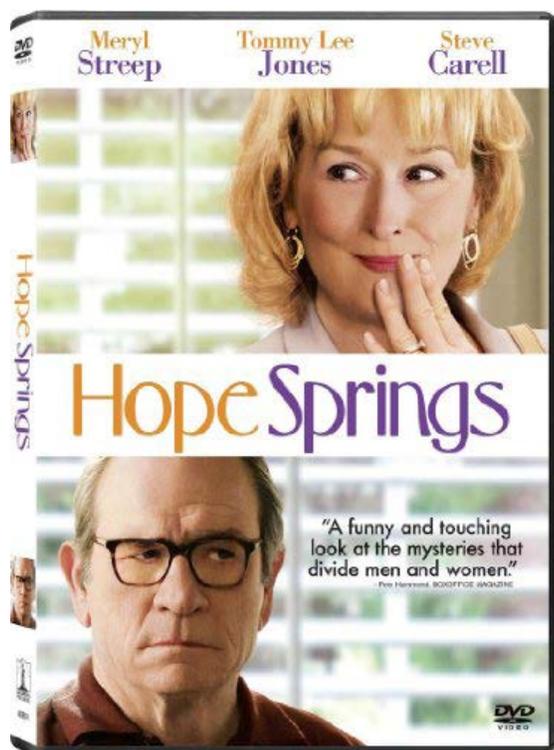
Tedium: Marriage & Couples Therapy in *Hope Springs*

Back in March there was a New York Times article which asked, "[Does Couples Therapy Work?](#)" In this article the author explored the myriad problems that exist for therapists attempting to treat struggling couples. One of the key issues, the author points out, is the lack of empirical and theoretical insights that distinguish couples therapy from individual therapy. Often a therapist can jump in there with the same bag of tools she might bring to individual therapy only to find those tools lacking. Couples therapy, it turns out, is a unique bird that requires unique approaches. You run into anger and volatility, issues of allegiance, and depression and anxiety that might exist separately from the spousal relationship. David Frankel's new film, *Hope Springs* takes a close look at a marriage that has been bled dry and the process of plodding through couples therapy.

In this film, Kay (Meryl Streep) and Arnold (Tommy Lee Jones) are a middle aged couple, mired in routine and boredom. His back problems led him to a separate bedroom years prior, where he

remains, contributing to the death of intimacy in their marriage. Each morning she places his breakfast before him – same thing each day; egg and toast. He eats, reads the paper, kisses her habitually on the cheek and departs for work. Each evening he falls asleep in his recliner, ESPN on the television. Like Sam Sheepdog and Ralph Wolf in the old [Bugs Bunny cartoons](#), Kay and Arnold carry on the proverbial clock-in each day, stepping into their roles as the dutiful husband and wife. The problem is, Kay wants more. And so she insists that the couple attend a week-long therapy session with renowned couples therapist Dr. Feld (Steve Carell).

The twist and perhaps the wisdom of this movie is that the process of therapy is portrayed as sluggish and grueling. Rather like real life. Unlike the couples therapy in *Couples Retreat* (2009), *Hope Springs* does not depict therapy as a high-jinx adventure with dancing, jet skiing, and a backdrop of tropical Eden. While *Couples Retreat* did illustrate the array of potential issues that couples face (again, the boredom of routine in particular), it also, ala Hollywood, made the process look silly and then easily resolved. I must admit that I expected something akin to this in *Hope Springs* when I saw that Steve Carell was cast as the therapist. We usually know Carell as funny so there was a certain expectation that the therapist in this film would be absurd, on some level. Turns out, Carell plays



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Dr. Feld straight. And he's not a bad therapist, actually. The process of getting Kay and Arnold to divulge and take chances is slow-moving and careful. Minus any "chase scenes" or bikini-clad extras, *Hope Springs* focuses on the dialogue and the real pain involved in opening something that has been so long closed.

Streep plays Kay as both strong (after all, she insisted on this therapy experience, telling Arnold that she was going with or without him) and at the same time down-trodden after years and years of Arnold's relentless, cranky complaining. She silently walks beside him in the grocery store when he insists they buy cold-cuts and eat in their hotel room rather than waste money in a restaurant. Arnold berates Dr. Feld's demeanor,

the entirety of the therapy experience and each nickel that the couple spends on something he deems unnecessary. Yet Kay is no victim in the relationship. She fully recognizes that the life she is living is vacant and devoid of an intimacy that she feels herself capable of. In one telling moment with Dr. Feld, she says of Arnold and the marriage, "He is everything. But I'm... I'm really lonely. And to be with someone, when you're not really with him can... it's... I think I might be less lonely... alone." With tremendous courage she realizes that life without Arnold might actually be less lonely than the tedium of their status quo. Her bravery eventually snaps her husband's attention to the fact that she is not a "given." She does expect more and she will leave if things remain unchanged.

Hope Springs can perform as an interesting tool in the process of couples therapy. Asking couples to watch the film together will no-doubt make them uncomfortable. It's often hard as an audience member to watch Kay and Arnold's terror and embarrassment as Dr. Feld explores their sexual relationship with them. While the film captures therapy as a difficult process, it also suggests that it is ultimately doable with tremendous courage and a bit of humor. It's also a good film for therapists to watch as it allows them to step into the shoes of Kay, Arnold, and Dr. Feld. It's an unusual Hollywood film in that avoids many of the old therapy clichés, instead depicting a process that is wrenching yet in the end rewarding.

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