Steve 0:00

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Steve 0:37

Welcome the At Work in America show. My name is Steve Boese. I'm with Trish Steed. Trish, what is happening?

Trish 0:59

I am here in Illinois today, so it's wonderful to be back. How are you?

Steve 1:05

I am great. Yeah, it's a hot summer day. It's been a awfully hot summer, but that's awesome. And yeah, I'm excited for today's show. I like it Trish, when we kind of do our own thing, and, you know, skip the guest once in a while; get back to our roots, do a little workplace Movie Hall of Fame, which is what we're doing today!

Trish 1:25

I love it because that's also one of the most requested shows we do is people always want to hear what movie are we going to review? Sometimes they're old movies. Sometimes they're not so old. So excited for today's episode.

Steve 1:38

So workplace Movie Hall of Fame, for folks who are maybe newer to the podcast, we've been doing this series, this occasional series, for years, I don't know how long, where we take a movie, usually a fairly popular movie, or a known movie, we re watch it, and we break it down and talk about some of the work and workplace themes in the movie and try to, yeah, just have some fun with it. So today's movie Trish, you know, and we've done some movies like, you know that everybody knows. We've done Big, we've done Mr. Mom, we've done a Flash Dance, what I remember, and back today we did but today's movie was maybe a little lesser known. It's called Still Alice. It came out in 2014 and it's a movie that's about a woman who is professional, a professor, who gets diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's, and we follow her journey, navigating the disease. It's progression, which is not great for her, her family dynamics, her workplace dynamics, and so many great issues. Here for a little background on the movie. I'd never seen it before, just watching it, though before, in prep for this show came out in 2014 starring Julianne Moore, Alec Baldwin and Kristen Stewart, notably Trish, it was a fairly low budget movie filmed in 23 days, which I I learned today, for about $5 million budget, and worldwide gross was about $45 million so did really well for a very heavy, heavily themed, you know, heavy themes, not a, you know, not a superhero movie, none of that, right? So, definitely a serious movie. But did really well. And then finally, Trish Julianne Moore, who's the star of the movie, and it's phenomenal in the movie, won, like every acting award that year. She won Oscars for best actress, she won the Golden Globe, she won the Critics Choice Award, and on and on, which almost never happens. And so that's some background on the movie. And so maybe I'll throw it over to you. Trish, what do you know about this movie? Have you seen it before? And let's get into Still Alice a little bit.

Trish 3:58

Yeah, no. First, thank you for giving all the backstory. There are a few things, little nuggets in there. I didn't know, you know, you said it's 2014 so I'm thinking I watched it when I was in my early 40s. This seemed like something so off in the future that I was sort of surprised by a lot of it, because her character is in her 50s, I think, or like, maybe 50.

Steve 4:20

Yeah she's maybe just about 50.

Trish 4:22

Yeah, just 50. And so at the time, my grandmother was alive, who was struggling with Alzheimer's herself. So that's what drew me to the movie. And you mentioned it was up for all these awards, and that was actually probably a year or so before you and I started doing our Oscar preview, preview show, so you wouldn't have seen it at that point, but it was almost hard to watch at times when you know someone who's going through it. Even though my grandmother was older, watching someone's deterioration is difficult, and I thought she did a really good job of portraying someone who's struggling, not just with losing your memory, but being someone who's a highly educated professor, as you mentioned, it's just hard to think about you know, your life as you know it is slipping away. It's not like a stroke maybe, where it's all of a sudden and you don't have that time to watch yourself deteriorate. So yeah, yeah. I'm really glad we're doing this, I think too, as you as we've seen with many guests we've had on previously, as you're aging, and you're maybe now taking care of aging parents, but you're starting to have health issues, right? Whatever those might be, it's a challenge. And so I was also looking at it differently this time through, as being in my 50s and thinking like, wow, she had a lot going on in addition to her own health challenges. So yeah, what did you think? Did you like it?

Steve 5:50

I did like the movie. It was, you know, I'm a big fan of doing those Oscar shows that we do every year. So we do watch a lot of really good movies. And I'd certainly call this a good movie. It was very serious and sometimes hard to watch, right? So as she's a 50 year old, very healthy, very active and very accomplished, the character is a linguistics professor, right? So her whole world is words and language and in communication. In some of the early manifestations of the of the Alzheimer's, which turns out to be early Alzheimer's, is she starts forgetting words. She starts losing her ability to sort of grasp a word, to kind of express her thought, right? And, you know, I hate to say it. Sometimes that happens to me too. And if it happens too often, I start to worry a little bit like, why can't I think of that word? I used to always be able to think of the word I want. But it's particularly poignant for her with, you know, language and her career, and she's so accomplished in the movie the character, and she starts to lose that, and it's a huge element of her personal identity, her personal maybe her worth as a person. And I'd love to maybe get into sort of one of the workplace themes, I think, which is your career as your identity and your perceived value to to the world. I'd love for you to maybe, you know, tell me about that you know. And because I think this character felt like, you know, her inability to function at a high level in her job, you know, was maybe the worst thing that was happening to her.

Trish 7:28

Yeah, you're right on that. I think too, when you're in a position like hers, where you are highly visible at work, it wasn't like she was doing a job somewhere off by herself, maybe not with a bigger team, but she was on stage every day for her students, and so I found it really both interesting, sad, and understandable that she also didn't come and tell her boss right away, right? She didn't tell the dean of the school, or something like that, that she was having these issues with memory loss, so her performance started to appear to go down, right? She was getting complaints. The students were noticing. Her boss ultimately has to speak with her about it. And so it just made me think about, wow, there are people in the workplace right now, whether it's early onset Alzheimer's or some other health issue. And 10 years ago, for sure, I don't think you'd come to the workplace and share that, and I do feel like, from a workplace perspective, I'm hoping we'd move the needle a little bit so that people would feel safer at work. I don't know. I mean, do you feel like we've made improvements enough to where people could come and tell their boss or colleagues that they're struggling?

Steve 8:42

Probably not enough. I think it depends certainly on the circumstance and the relationship you might have with the organization, your tenure, and maybe the nature of the problem you're fighting through. Because she the character, even as she starts to exhibit more symptoms right of early Alzheimer's and starts to slip; She knows she's a you know, in this disease, you're aware of what's happening to you as it's happening. And she would have had to have known that this progression of this disease was going to make her unable to perform at work, basically unable for her to work at all. And she had to have known that. So when you know that, right, you're going to be even more reluctant to come up to your your boss, or your management, or even, even just some colleagues at work, to say, Hey, I'm I'm having this, this type of an issue, and I'm struggling when you know that there's no coming back from that issue, right, at least in that role, like, it's not like she was maybe being treated for some other type of a disease, which, if you could kind of overcome, you could or even while you're going through the treatment, you could still perform in that role, maybe with some accommodations or something. So that, I think, is a big difference as well, if you know that whatever you're going through mentally or physically is going to preclude your ability to even work. At that role, then you're more likely to try to keep it to yourself as long as possible.

Trish 10:08

Again, people were thinking she was a poor performer all of a sudden, yeah. And I thought, wow. Like, her boss wasn't asking her either, though, like, what's going on? And you see that happen all throughout workplaces now where someone is just all of a sudden not performing the way you're used to them performing, but yet we as leaders don't always go to them and say, Hey, how are you? Are you? Okay? Do you need any help? Right? So it was kind of sad on both ends.

Steve 10:36

We don't see this in the movie. We really only see her coming in, basically getting called into her dean's office to answer for some of the student evaluations which were increasingly getting harsh and poor upon her as a as a professor, when he addresses it with her, it's clear that, at least by implication in the movie, that they were not having regular and ongoing conversations, kind of manager to employee, and regular check ins and on a regular cadence where, you know, this kind of thing would have started to reveal itself, even if she hadn't admitted it. Right? Sure, and we see that a lot too, when you have a an employee who's been in the organization for a while, who's always been a good performer, right? Managers tend to go look at the other folks. Maybe we need more coaching, or have more problems, or often, our better performers get the least amount of coaching and support, right, because we feel like they don't need it.

Trish 11:36

Yeah, you're right. I mean, it was definitely a classic representation of what a lot of people experience in their career, right? I do have a question for you, though, so you mentioned that, you know sometimes, and we're both in our 50s, right? So sometimes you say you can't find the right word, and I think, too, there was an element of she was in denial before she actually had the diagnosis. Because part of being in your 50s ish, right? You can talk to anyone, you start to forget words or like, I'll go to say an actual word where I think I'm like, in my mind, it's the right word, and it comes out as something completely different. And I'll be like, Why did I call that that right? And if you talk to your doctors, typically, just your regular medical practitioners, like, Oh yeah, it's just brain fog from being in your 50s; hormone changes. So I wonder too, especially with this particular disease that she has, was she almost thinking it was, like, no big deal. It was something else. It was just normal, right?

Steve 12:41

Probably. I mean, at 50 years old, you might suspect a number of different, you know, problems before you jump to and, in fact, a rare form of early Alzheimer's, according to the movie, right? It was not just just, it was very unusual diagnosis, but it was so, yeah, so we see this. We see her really beginning to unravel as her disease worsens, and then her life becomes much more challenging on a number of fronts, certainly her challenges in being able to effectively perform at her job, which really quickly ends, right? You know, someone who's a professor of linguistics, really a professor of anything, your early onset Alzheimer's is going to be basically take you out of the workforce, really, no matter what your job is, right? So there's, and it was such a huge portion of her life and her identity, she immediately begins to struggle, right with, with that loss, right? So it's not just the loss of memory and the loss of function and the loss of, you know, her cognitive abilities. It's a big part of her value to, you know, as a person. And I do think in America, I'll say this, I'll editorialize for a second, we do tend to put so much of our evaluation in our assessment of people and their perceived value, even our own perceived value of ourselves on what we do, what's our job? How successful are we at it? You know? And I tend to think that's kind of sad, but it's, I think it's the truth in for a lot of folks.

Trish 14:16

I think the movie is a good reminder to to realize too everything can change in a mere moment. You know, change really quickly when it comes to a person's health, whether that's mental health or physical health, right? So, yeah, not only did she lose her identity because her children in the movie are grown, right? You mentioned Kristen Stewart, she was probably the youngest. I don't know if they tell us how old she is.

Steve 14:40

She was the youngest sibling in the movie, yeah, right, probably about 21-22 if I had to guess.

Trish 14:47

So all of a sudden, she probably had gone through that empty nest phase a little bit, right, because the kids are out of the house. And so you almost dive more into work when that happens when your kids move out, right? So you. Even more so than if this had happened at 45 probably.

Steve 15:05

And also your mid to mid 40s to your mid maybe 60, right? For most many folks, especially in professional jobs, that's kind of your corporate apex, right? That's when you achieve the highest positions, probably earning the most money, the most prestige, maybe still kind of climbing. And we see this right the second half of this movie from sort of why we wanted to do it for workplace Movie Hall of Fame is not, you know, beyond her role and her identity as an employee and as a worker and her career is the impact on those around her from both a caregiving perspective and also for the husband, specifically his career. And this, it's actually a huge part of the second half of this movie, the dynamic, what's happening around caregiving, and then what's happening with his husband, who comes off pretty unsympathetic for most of the movie, around his career, maybe talk a little bit about that aspect of this story.

Trish 16:07

Yeah, I think you're right. It really explores all sides of this, right? And so, yes, you're still seeing her deteriorate, and she knows it. You mentioned, like, how scary that would be when you know it. My grandma, actually, I remember the specific conversation where she said, I'm losing my mind, and I know it, and I was just like, like, what do you say? So as a caregiver, you don't even know what to say, because you don't usually, whatever happens again, someone can have a heart attack, a stroke of whatever you're helping them go through. You're not a doctor, you don't know what to tell them, and so she was looking for some amount of reassurance from her family, and they didn't know what she was going through either. So I think there's that element of, gosh, if no one knows, it's hard on everybody, right? I don't know. I mean, what stood out for you from a caregiving perspective?

Steve 17:03

A couple of things, certainly, one being so the character is married, as you said, an empty nester, two older children who, one of whom is already married. One is, I think, maybe getting married. And then a kind of a third sibling, who's younger and on her own as well, I think. And then a husband, who's a professor, too, I believe, and also navigating his issues, including being recruited. They're in New York City in the movie this family, and he's being recruited by the Mayo Clinic to go move to Minnesota. I think it's in Minnesota right for a prestigious job and an opportunity which he really wants. This character wants to go take that job, and he wants to drag his poor Alzheimer's suffering wife along with him away from New York City. But that's kind of a subplot in the movie. But what we're seeing here is the stress that having to provide care for anyone really, but certainly for someone who you didn't expect to have to provide care for just disrupts your own life and the other lives of the family members, because the husband was trying to climb his his ladder in his career, right? The older kids have their own lives already going right? They have one had a child already, I believe, and the other one was about to get married, right? And so they had their own lives. They were not in position to drop everything they were doing to become caregivers to their mother, who's only 50 years old. And then finally, they really the only person in that family with sort of the space in her life to provide care was the youngest daughter, who's kind of trying to find her way as an aspiring actor in California who they dragged back to New York basically said, Well, you don't really have a job, a real job, right? So you can take care of your mom, right? And so just the stress all of that places on the family, it's profound. And I think in our workplaces, certainly, we've talked a lot about caregiving the last couple of years, but until you're in it, until you see it, and this movie does a great job of really showing that to you, right, showing what it could be like having to provide care in this fashion to a family member, you don't understand, and I think organizations don't understand how difficult it can be for employees to continue to work and function at a high level while being faced with those kinds of caregiving responsibilities in their personal lives. It's unbelievable how difficult it is.

Trish 19:36

Yeah, and it continues to get more difficult because the aging population is extremely large, and because of medical advancements across the board, people are living longer, or even if you have some sort of catastrophic health issue, you are often able to be saved right, or given medication or something. So it's yeah, I don't think we've ever seen caregiving to this degree. And again, I'm glad you mentioned the stress side of it, because there is a lot of unknown, and everybody gets stressed out when we don't know what's coming next or how to do things, or what the best decision or path is, right. And it's a lot of opinion when it comes to medicine. I think the other thing, when you mentioned her children is, you know, with something like early onset Alzheimer's, it is hereditary. So then they had to decide, as her children, are we going to get tested to see if we have the gene? Yeah, and I won't give away. So if someone I don't want to say if they do or don't, but let's just say that going through the stress of having to decide whether you want to know if you're going to be in that same position in the next 20 to 30 years is stressful. You mentioned having children because then do they decide to have a child because of it, right? So it's, it's very difficult. And again, a lot of a lot of illnesses are like that. Right heart issues can be hereditary, certainly other other things can be very common to members of a family. So yeah, it's just like layer upon layer. If you ever want a movie that's like an onion to dissect, it's this one, I think, sure, but it's so instructional. Did you find it was sort of instructional? Because to me, I was sort of looking at it like even if they don't have that exact condition, it sort of helped me think through methodically how a family can go through, you know, their own career decisions and whether or not we do care for our loved ones, right, who need us. So a lot of people would walk away from that.

Steve 21:48

It did place caregiving these that type of a caregiving challenge, and really, really any type of caregiving challenge, I suppose, forces people to make choices and often sacrifices, right? So we see in the movie as cognitively, she's declining and needs more care. Needs more full time care. They get to a point where they really don't want to leave her alone in the home at all for anyone right length of time, so they have to bring in a caregiver outside of the family, and meanwhile, he doesn't really make a speech, but you can sense, like the husband character, thinking to himself, so let's say he's around 50 as well, right? Thinking, Boy, I've got 20, maybe 25 more years of this career I've got, right and, yeah, you know, I got to think about that. And I've got goals, you know, hopes for that too, and the quandary that you get placed into, right? And he does, like I said, he comes off pretty unsympathetic for most of the movie, and he sort of comes around a little bit towards the end, but the I've never been in that situation where I had to, like, literally, make decisions around, you know, putting my own goals, career aspirations, etc, on the back burner, right to provide care, but it's a very real thing. And I think the caregiving, the caregiving issue, it's as I think about it more, and we talk about it more, we write about it more. And we've had a number of guests on the podcast talking about caregiving in the last couple years. It's just so much more complicated than than I would have even guessed, right? There's so many elements to it.

Trish 23:33

It is, and it's we're talking a lot about the employee, the impact on her as the employee, or her husband is an employee. It's also the co workers, because when you're going through something, and we know we've had this happen, right? I think we've said my my dad had a heart attack, and so like you're my coworker, you you have to deal with my stress. You have to deal with maybe picking up hours, right? When I'm having to do something to care for someone. So I think there's that element too. It doesn't just impact that one employee. It's a ripple effect. This is like, far reaching, right? It can cause your coworkers to have to work more hours or pick up projects that they weren't working on before, and now, all of a sudden, they're trying to make it work that way. So yeah, it's just, I don't know, it's more impactful than I ever realized, maybe when we started talking about this six or so years ago. So yeah, I do view it as helpful. Seeing examples of this in media.

Steve 24:36

It's an underrated story. And like I said, just a smaller movie. It's now. It's over 10 years old. Lower budget movie, smaller movie, did have some acclaim, due to Julianne Moore winning basically every acting award that year, but, but it did kind of disappear a little bit under the radar. It's available. You can rent it. It was, you know, Amazon Prime, kind of a rental for a couple dollars to find it. It may be in other places too, but that's how. I found it definitely worth of viewing if you are someone who is in a caregiving situation or is concerned about it from the employer point of view, thinking about the kind of seeing more in a dramatized fashion, certainly, but understanding a little bit more about what employees would be going through in these kind of situations. Now, she's not an elder. She's not a you know, the character in the movie is only 50, but it's very indicative of some of the issues that older folks have, right with Alzheimer's and other cognitive issues, and having to support employees who are providing care is, I think it's going to be a big issue next year. We've kicked around some of our thoughts on our trends report for 2026 I pitched strongly for elder care, specifically, not just caregiving, but elder care to be an important issue for next year. And I think we're going to, we're going to talk about that a lot more, and it's, it probably can't be talked about enough, at least from my perspective, is, like you said, with the aging population and folks being really stretched and also too like birth rates are declining and have been declining in the US for a longer period of time, so people will have less or people will have fewer siblings to lean on in these situations, right? It may not have any, right? They might be, you know, as their parents age, so this is going to be an issue in workplaces for a really long time.

Trish 26:33

It is, and I'm glad you're circling back to the whole workplace perspective, because one thing I was thinking just today about another family member is there are things like, you know, HIPAA that you have to be thinking about, right, making sure that you as a caregiver have access to the information you need about who you're caring for. Well, that's something that you know, HR is very well versed in and we could certainly be a resource to employees and to leaders on just some of the facts you need to understand about privacy and data and how you know how to be helpful. I think also, we've talked in years past about different things that employers can do to stand out and be a true differentiator from a workplace culture perspective. And we've talked a lot about helping, you know, young people with student loans or just things that are, you know, helping them figure out how to buy their first home. But we always, we the collective, we have always thought about the younger side of employees, right, of your journey. I think if you really want to differentiate yourself right now, start putting in components of elder care, of unexpected accidents, illnesses, diseases, right? Because I think when we think about HR being very strategic, one of the most strategic things I ever did was working on the benefits plans for my company that I was an HR leader for, and I never thought of benefits as strategic until I got to that level. And when you're thinking about because, you know, it's anonymized, but you know how many employees are dealing with certain issues or conditions as well as their family members because they're on your plan. So it's, it's a very interesting thing to think about, how you can proactively benefit people's health so that maybe by the time they get to a caregiving situation, it's not as difficult for them, and it does take some pressure off, right?

Steve 28:40

Yeah, and I think, I think part of this is just being aware, right, being understanding the composition of your workforce, understanding the likely set of challenges that many of them will have. Many of these folks who are dealing with elder care issues, for example, are also still, may still have children at home, where they may have kids in college, right? And they're not done being a caregiver of their own children or other family members as well the sandwich generation they talk about all the time, but that's a very real thing, right? For employees who are, again, maybe late 40s into the late 50s, maybe, and maybe a little bit further, having those issues a lot, and again, in many organizations, right? Those are the people tasked with the most responsibilities, the most stressful jobs, the most high leverage jobs, the most important jobs, if you want to call them that, that's, I guess, I suppose, arguable, but we could say that, and so facing a lot of pressures themselves. So this is on the surface, when we talked about having this movie as a workplace Movie Hall of Fame, I thought, well, really, you know, Alzheimer's, like, I don't get it, but it really makes so much sense to think about this from a, you know, self identity, self value, identifying the self as your job, right? You know. Know, and then that second part of the story all around the really practical and often, you know, just heart wrenching challenges around caregiving and balancing, you know, balancing everything you need to balance as an as an adult, having to wrestle with these challenges so super poignant, really good movie. And unlike many Oscar type movies, Trish, mercifully short, like 100 minutes long, like you can watch this on a weeknight, right? You don't have to devote three and a half hours of your life to it, which is pretty awesome. So yeah, I like the movie worth a watch. I recommend it.

Trish 30:40

I agree. I really liked it. I liked it more the second time through too though. I think again, when you look at it with that workplace lens it, it just really makes so much more sense of how everyone's feeling and where they are in their careers. And I would say too, I think walking away from watching it again, just seeing how her children stepped up; And these are children that are working right. They have jobs, they're young, and I don't think we give our young people enough credit sometimes at their capacity to handle really tough, challenging things in life. And I thought it did a good job of showing how the children were coping with this themselves, and they became a big help to the father and to the mother, to some degree, with her knowledge. But yeah. So yeah, think about, I think we just have to think about our benefits plans and about caregiving very holistically. If you only think about one thing in a silo and something, you know, it's just, if you want to make an impact in your organization, this is an area you can truly make an impact and start having conversations, right?

Steve 31:53

Yeah, and growing important, growing in importance. You know, with the demographics in the US and the demographics of the workforce, it's going to be more and more of an issue over the next, you know, 15 years. So, but the time to start is, is now. It's really it's really now. So, uh, when we talk about talking more about caregiving in our 2026 Trends report in a couple months. So yeah, stay tuned.

Trish 32:14

But we talk all the time about, how do we make people feel connected at work? How do we make them stay with us? So even some a subject like caregiving, if you just start thinking the impacts that it has on retention, on company culture, on productivity, it hits every single aspect of our career journey. Caregiving does. So that's why it's an important trend. That's why it's an emerging and evolving trend. And yeah, we're going to have some really cool research coming out about it.

Steve 32:41

All right, good stuff. I think we'll let it go there, Trish. Still Alice 2014, Julianne Moore. Watch her in her Oscar winning performance. Watch to get mad at Alec Baldwin several times during the movie for his insensitivity, which is fun. And, yeah, check it out and tell us what you think so. Good stuff, Trish. I had a good time talking about this. And yeah, it was fun. What about our next movie? Yeah, I don't know what we have to we have to pick one.

Trish 33:08

Yeah, whoever's listening to this or watching this, drop us a line. We'd like to take suggestions.

Steve 33:14

Good stuff. All right, this has been the At Work in America show sponsored by our friends at Workhuman. My name is Steve Boese. Thank you, Trish Steed. Thanks everybody for listening. Go to hrhappyhour.net. For all the show archives and subscribe. Tell a friend all the things. We'll see you next time, and bye for now.

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