

Things not *Normal* in small town Illinois

A review of the HBO film, *Normal*, by Erin K. Swenson

I saw the HBO film *Normal* last evening, and was not overwhelmed with its quality. It won't win any awards. Jessica Lange did her usual wonderful performance and Tom Wilkinson did well with a very difficult role as a middle aged male-to-female transsexual. That notwithstanding, I really liked this movie and recommend it as a valuable resource.

To me the film seemed less about transgender experience and more about what happens when a loving marriage faces the ultimate challenge. It seemed clear to me that the writer had no real desire to portray anything other than a minimalist portrait of Ray's gender transition. For instance, there was no reference to Ray's receiving any kind of help whatsoever from anyone for his transition. Few of us would have what it takes to go it alone as Ray did. There was no support group, no therapist, and no supportive physician anywhere in the film. Had Ray been plotting his transition with a good gender therapist he would have NEVER gone to work with clip ons as his first step (or did he mean physically small when he said he would make small changes to his boss?). Clearly the writers had little interest in the transition itself, other than to fill it out enough to play its role in the family story. There were certainly no blatantly negative transgender images here.

There are indeed marriages that weather the storms of gender transition in much the same way as this one. I am a professional marriage and family therapist who also transitioned in a 27 year marriage, and I found remarkable similarities between this fictionalized relationship and my own. We are no longer married, but we do share much of our lives together, including physical tenderness. We have two wonderful grown daughters to share holidays with, whose lives bring great joy to both of us. We celebrated our 36th wedding anniversary last December with a warm hug, and often spend time reminiscing about the many wonderful years we have had both pre- and post-transition.

The positive message of *Normal* in my opinion, is not what transgender people are like, but what a strong loving family can be when faced with gender issues. It is a message filled with hope. For a couple to move through gender transition together requires remarkable personal maturity, a relationship that has stood the test of time, well developed emotional intimacy, and a great love for each other. When these qualities are present, the whole family, including the children, benefits. For many of us this can only be a dream, because we do not have relationships with these kinds of qualities. But others do. This film will encourage them to enter the fray with some assurance that, though different, their relationships can survive and perhaps even thrive through gender transition.

Normal shows us all that gender is but a small and fleeting part of a really good relationship. In the end, Ruth and Irma are a same-sex couple who share two children and also happen to be legally married. I wonder if their church will welcome them back?

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erin@erinswen.com