

# The Holdovers

The Holdovers is a 2023 American Christmas comedy-drama film directed by Alexander Payne and written by David Hemingson. Set in late 1970 and early 1971, the film stars Paul Giamatti as a strict classics teacher at a New England boarding school who is forced to chaperone a handful of students with nowhere to go on the Christmas break. Da'Vine Joy Randolph portrays the school cafeteria manager, and Dominic Sessa plays one of the students who stays on campus.

Filming took place from January to March of 2022 in Massachusetts. *The Holdovers* premiered at the 50th Telluride Film Festival on August 31, 2023, and was released in the United States by Focus Features on October 27, 2023. It received positive reviews and has grossed over \$44 million. It was named one of the top 10 films of 2023 by the National Board of Review and the American Film Institute, and received many other accolades, including two wins at the Golden Globe Awards and the British Academy Film Awards; won the Best Supporting Actress award at both ceremonies. *The Holdovers* also received five nominations at the 96th Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Giamatti; Randolph won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

## **Plot**

In <u>New England</u> in December 1970, Paul Hunham is a <u>classics</u> professor at Barton Academy, an all-male boarding school that he once attended on scholarship. His students and fellow teachers despise him for his strict grading and stubborn personality. Dr. Woodrup, Barton's headmaster and Hunham's former student, scolds Hunham for costing the academy money by flunking the son of a senator, causing <u>Princeton University</u> to rescind his offer of admission.

As punishment, Hunham is forced to supervise five students left on campus during the holiday break, including Angus Tully, whose mother cancelled a family trip to <u>Saint Kitts</u> in order to honeymoon with her new husband. Also staying behind is cafeteria manager Mary Lamb, whose late son, Curtis, attended Barton and was killed in the Vietnam War after being drafted.



Theatrical	release	poster
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Directed by	Alexander Payne	
Written by	David	
	Hemingson	
Produced by	Mark Johnson	
	Bill Block	
	David	
	Hemingson	
Starring	Paul Giamatti	
	Da'Vine Joy	
	Randolph	
	Dominic Sessa	
Cinematography	Dominic Sessa  Eigil Bryld	
Cinematography Edited by		
	Eigil Bryld	
Edited by Music by Production	Eigil Bryld Kevin Tent	
Edited by  Music by	Eigil Bryld Kevin Tent Mark Orton	
Edited by  Music by  Production	Eigil Bryld Kevin Tent Mark Orton Miramax	

To the students' chagrin, Hunham forces them to study and exercise on their break. After six days, the wealthy father of one of the students arrives by helicopter and agrees to take all five students on the family's ski trip with their parents' permission. Angus, unable to reach his parents for permission, is left alone at Barton with Hunham and Mary. When Hunham catches Angus trying to book a hotel room, the two argue about Hunham's disciplinarian policies. Angus impulsively runs through the school halls and defiantly leaps into a pile of gym equipment, dislocating

	October 27, 2023 (United States)
Running time	133 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$13 million <sup>[2]</sup>
Box office	\$44.6 million <sup>[3][4]</sup>

his shoulder. Hunham takes Angus to the hospital. To protect Hunham from blame, Angus lies to the doctors about the circumstances of his injury. At a restaurant, Hunham and Angus encounter Lydia Crane, Woodrup's assistant. Hunham flirts with Lydia, who invites the pair to her Christmas Eve party.

Angus, Hunham, Mary, and Barton's janitor, Danny, attend Lydia's party. Angus kisses Lydia's niece, Elise. Hunham is disappointed to discover that Lydia has a boyfriend, and Mary gets drunk and has an emotional breakdown over Curtis's death. Hunham insists on leaving early. Hunham and Angus argue; when Hunham references Angus's father, Angus says his father is dead. Mary scolds Hunham for his unsympathetic behavior.

Feeling remorseful for his actions, Hunham arranges a small Christmas celebration. Mary persuades Hunham to grant Angus's wish for a "field trip" to <u>Boston</u>. After dropping Mary off in <u>Roxbury</u> to spend time with her pregnant sister, Angus and Hunham bond over various activities in Boston, including ice skating and a visit to the <u>Museum of Fine Arts</u>. They encounter one of Hunham's classmates from <u>Harvard University</u>, who has become a successful academic. When prompted, Hunham lies about his career, and Angus plays along. Hunham reluctantly confesses to Angus that he was expelled from Harvard after deliberately hitting a classmate (a <u>legacy</u> donor's son who falsely accused him of plagiarism) with a car. Although the incident nearly ruined Hunham's career prospects, the old Barton headmaster took pity on him and offered him an adjunct teaching job.

When Hunham and Angus see a movie at the <u>Orpheum Theatre</u>, Angus sneaks away and Hunham catches him entering a taxi. Angus explains he wants to see his father, and Hunham agrees to accompany him, assuming they are going to a cemetery. However, Angus's father is alive and confined in a <u>psychiatric hospital</u> due to mental health issues and violent outbursts. Following the visit, Angus expresses concern that his future behavior will echo his father's. Hunham comforts Angus, expressing respect for him and affirming that Angus is not his father. Hunham, Angus, Mary, and Danny celebrate New Year's Eve together.

In January 1971, Hunham is summoned to Dr. Woodrup's office, where Angus's mother and stepfather are waiting. They tell Hunham that Angus's visit to the psychiatric hospital was unauthorized and that a snow globe Angus had taken from Lydia's Christmas Eve party and given to his father led to another violent outburst. Angus's mother and stepfather threaten to withdraw Angus from Barton and send him to a military academy. However, Hunham defends Angus and takes full responsibility for organizing the trip. Woodrup fires Hunham but allows Angus to stay at Barton.

Mary, who has come to better terms with Curtis's death, gives Hunham a notebook for the <u>monograph</u> he wants to write. Hunham and Angus share a farewell. In his car, Hunham takes a sip of the expensive cognac he stole from Woodrup, spits it out toward the school and drives away.

#### Cast

- Paul Giamatti as Paul Hunham, a classics teacher at the Barton Academy boarding school. Hunham (unlike Giamatti) has a lazy eye, which was achieved with a "big, soft contact lens" that made it difficult for the actor to see.
- <u>Dominic Sessa</u> as Angus Tully, a Barton student "held over" (i.e., left on campus) during Christmas break
- Da'Vine Joy Randolph as Mary Lamb, Barton cafeteria manager and bereaved mother
- Carrie Preston as Miss Lydia Crane, assistant to Barton headmaster Dr. Woodrup
- Brady Hepner as Teddy Kountze, Angus's enemy; one of the five holdovers
- Ian Dolley as Alex Ollerman, a member of <u>The Church of Jesus</u>
   Christ of Latter-day Saints; one of the five holdovers
- Jim Kaplan as Ye-Joon Park, an <u>international student</u> from Korea; one of the five holdovers
- Michael Provost as Jason Smith, the Barton football team's quarterback; one of the five holdovers
- Andrew Garman as Dr. Hardy Woodrup, the headmaster of Barton Academy
- Naheem Garcia as Danny, a Barton janitor
- Stephen Thorne as Thomas Tully, Angus's institutionalized father
- Gillian Vigman as Judy Clotfelter, Angus's mother
- Tate Donovan as Stanley Clotfelter, Angus's stepfather
- Darby Lily Lee-Stack as Elise, Angus's romantic interest and Lydia's niece
- Bill Mootos as Mr. Endicott, a Barton teacher
- Dustin Tucker as Mr. Rosenswieg, a Barton teacher
- Juanita Pearl as Peggy, Mary's pregnant sister
- Dan Aid as Kenneth, a Vietnam veteran
- Kelly AuCoin as Hugh Cavanaugh, Paul's former Harvard classmate
- Colleen Clinton as Mrs. Cavanaugh, Hugh's wife

Paul Giamatti stars as Paul Hunham

## **Production**

## Development

*The Holdovers* is the second collaboration between director <u>Alexander Payne</u> and actor <u>Paul Giamatti</u> after <u>Sideways</u> (2004). Payne conceived it after watching <u>Marcel Pagnol</u>'s 1935 film <u>Merlusse</u>, and contacted screenwriter David Hemingson, whose boarding-school television pilot he had read. In 2018, Hemingson

was running his show, <u>Whiskey Cavalier</u> for ABC and was surprised to receive a call from Payne. The television pilot, *Stonehaven*, was set in present time, but Payne suggested a film using an older setting instead like 1958 or 1970. Hemingson agreed on 1970 because it had more in common with the present time and 1958 was too close to <u>Dead Poets Society</u>'s timeline. In 2024, Hemingson revealed that the film is partially <u>semi-autobiographical</u>, with some of the dialogue and scenes taken verbatim from his own life, such as words from his own real-life uncle. The scene with the sex worker was inspired by a real-life incident that he said actually "happened to me on First Avenue and 30th Street with [my uncle] when I was seven years old. This woman walked up on an incredibly cold day and solicited and said, 'The kid can wait around the corner.' That is an



Director Alexander Payne

actual incident from my life. The cherries jubilee thing is something that happened to me with my mother. So many of the things in the movie are just a love letter to my mom and my uncle and my dad." In June 2021, Miramax acquired the distribution rights. In early 2022, Da'Vine Joy Randolph and Carrie Preston joined the cast. [11][12]

## **Filming**

Filming began in Massachusetts on January 27, 2022, and wrapped in late March. [13][14][15] Location manager Kai Quinlan, who had worked on other films set in New England like *Spotlight* and *Black Mass*, drew on her Massachusetts upbringing for the film. [16] Similarly, Giamatti drew on his experience attending Choate Rosemary Hall in the 1980s, including his memories of a strict teacher whom he described as "not a happy man." [17] To create the fictional Barton Academy, the film crew shot on location at five real-life Massachusetts schools: Groton School (the chapel and the Nashua River), Northfield Mount Hermon School (the chapel and building exteriors), Deerfield Academy (the front lawn and building exteriors), St. Mark's School (the dining hall, gymnasium, and headmaster's office), and Fairhaven High School (the study hall and auditorium). [18][19] Dominic Sessa, in his first film role as Angus, attended Deerfield in the class of 2022. [20] The film crew also shot at the historic Somerville and Orpheum theatres and on the Boston Common. Payne later said that capturing the 1970s aesthetic was relatively easy because "change comes slowly to New England". [21]

# Cinematography and post-production

To make the film look and feel like it was actually made during the 1970s, Alexander Payne hired <u>Eigil Bryld</u> to serve as cinematographer and camera operator. On being selected, Bryld remarked "There's a sense of a spirit of the '70s movies — breaking away from your studios. And all the DPs of the period that I really admired would push the film stock or they would do handheld or whatever. And then I started thinking, 'That's really what I should be going for.'" Both digital and film formats were tested prior to filming, before it was decided to shoot the film digitally with an <u>Arri Alexa</u> with <u>Panavision</u> H series lenses, particularly a 55mm lens, creating a "vintage portrait look." "It's a movie about people who are forced into the frame together, and they don't necessarily want to be in the same frame," Bryld added. "Gradually over time, they come together more and more ... And that was one arc we were looking for — how we would reflect that, how we framed it and where we put the camera." <u>Film emulsion</u> and <u>color grading</u> were added to the footage during post-production to complete the look. [22]

The crew added to the film's 1970s stylization by creating a retro-style title card and logo variants for Focus Features and Miramax to open the film. Graphic designer Nate Carlson, who worked with Payne on Election (1999), was responsible for creating these, using the film's color palette from the set designs and visual style, as well as inspiration from the way film studio logos looked in the 1970s, to make them look as authentic and true to the time period as possible. Although the film's international prints (distributed by Universal Pictures) could simply use the 1963 Universal logo to open the film, neither Focus Features nor Miramax (the American distributor and production company) existed in the 1970s, so Carlson had to invent an original symbol for Focus Features (that involved lowercase "ff" initials with animated text moving into place on a red background) and a looped zoom-in animation for Miramax. Film emulsion was then added to make the logos look realistic for the time period. Miramax was so enthusiastic about Carlson's take on their logo that it hired him to design the studio's new permanent logo for their future films, debuting with Operation Fortune: Ruse de Guerre (2023) and The Beekeeper (2024). For the film's title card, Carlson kept things simple, using a custom font of his own design while staying in line with Payne's vision. He also designed the crest for Barton Academy and created two versions, one dating back to the 1800s to reflect its history and a modern, updated version. [23]

#### Music

Original music for *The Holdovers* was composed by <u>Mark Orton</u>. The soundtrack also features several classic <u>Christmas songs</u>, and other songs from the 1970s by <u>The Allman Brothers Band</u>, <u>Tony Orlando and Dawn</u>, <u>Labi Siffre</u>, <u>Badfinger</u>, <u>Shocking Blue</u>, <u>Damien Jurado</u>, <u>Herb Alpert</u>, <u>Gene Autry</u>, <u>Temptations</u>, <u>Chet Baker</u>, <u>Artie Shaw</u>, and <u>Cat Stevens</u>. The soundtrack was released digitally by <u>Back Lot Music</u> on November 10, 2023, and on compact disc and vinyl on November 17.

# Release

A special screening of the film was held for buyers on September 11, 2022. The next day, it was reported that Focus Features had acquired distribution rights for \$30 million. The film was scheduled for a limited theatrical release on November 10, 2023, followed by a wide release on November  $22.^{[26]}$  However, it was pushed up to a limited release on October 27, followed by a wide release on November  $10.^{[27]}$  It released in the United Kingdom on January 19,  $2024.^{[1]}$ 

The Holdovers's world premiere was at the 50th Telluride Film Festival on August 31,  $2023.^{\boxed{[28][29]}}$  It also screened at the 2023 Toronto International Film Festival on September 10, 2023, where it was runner-up for the People's Choice Award. It was also invited to the 28th Busan International Film Festival's 'Icon' section, where it was shown on October 7,  $2023.^{\boxed{[32]}}$ 

#### Home media

*The Holdovers* was released on digital platforms on November 30, 2023, followed by a  $\underline{\text{Blu-ray}}$  and  $\underline{\text{DVD}}$  release on January 2, 2024. [33]

# Reception

#### **Box office**

As of March 13, 2024, *The Holdovers* had grossed \$20.4 million in the United States and Canada and \$23.6 million in other territories for a worldwide total of \$43.9 million. [3][4]

The film made \$211,093 from six theaters in its opening weekend, an average of \$35,082 per venue. [34] It expanded to 64 theaters in its second weekend, making \$599,833. [35] It then made \$3.2 million from 778 theaters in its third weekend. [36] Continuing to expand, it made \$2.7 million in both its fourth and fifth weekends. [37][38] Following its five Oscar nominations, the film expanded from 127 theaters to 1,262 in its 14th week of release and made \$520,000, an increase of 568% from the previous weekend. [39]

#### **Critical response**





Paul Giamatti and Da'Vine Joy Randolph garnered critical acclaim for their performances as Paul Hunham and Mary Lamb, and received Academy Award nominations for Best Actor and Supporting Actress, respectively, with Randolph winning.

On the <u>review aggregator</u> website <u>Rotten Tomatoes</u>, 97% of 353 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 8.5/10. The website's consensus reads: "Beautifully bittersweet, *The Holdovers* marks a satisfying return to form for director Alexander Payne." Metacritic, which uses a <u>weighted average</u>, assigned the film a score of 82 out of 100, based on 61 critics, indicating "universal acclaim". Audiences polled by <u>CinemaScore</u> gave the film an average grade of "A" on an A+ to F scale, while those polled by <u>PostTrak</u> gave it an 80% overall positive score.

Wesley Morris of *The New York Times* praised Giamatti's performance and Payne's direction, writing: "Even as the story accrues the heft of personal tragedy, each scene seems to float or bob." Patrick Ryan, writing for *USA Today*, compared it to Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, noting that both films grapple with troubled pasts and shattered dreams at Christmastime. Capra's Critics have also compared it to the films of Hal Ashby, such as *Harold and Maude* and *The Last Detail*.

Reviews in <u>The Boston Globe</u> and <u>Boston.com</u> both praised the film's 1970s New England setting. <u>[45][46]</u> Ann Hornaday of <u>The Washington Post</u> wrote that it "doesn't only have the look and feel of that time period, it resuscitates the finest elements of its narrative traditions". <u>[47]</u> <u>Richard Brody</u>, writing for <u>The New Yorker</u>, described <u>The Holdovers</u> as "a pile of clichés", but one realized "with such loving immediacy that it feels as if Payne were discovering them for himself". Brody was more critical of the time period, arguing that the "hermetically sealed, historically reduced drama" ignored the politically fraught setting of the 1970s. <u>[48]</u> Nonetheless, Michael Schulman, another writer for *The New Yorker*, included Giamatti, Sessa and Randolph in his list of the year's best performances, and considered the last "in a prime position for the Best Supporting Actress race". <u>[49]</u>

<u>Justin Chang</u> of the <u>Los Angeles Times</u> praised the film's "enveloping sense of time and place", but as a whole, criticized it as "a flat, phony, painfully diagrammatic movie masquerading as a compassionate, humane one". Chang also wrote that Mary Lamb, despite Randolph's affecting performance, was "somehow the movie's most under-developed role". [44]

Filmmaker <u>James Gray</u> praised the film, saying: "The film takes place in 1970, the first year of American history's greatest hangover. And the rhythms and look, precisely rendered, lend a bracing authenticity to the proceedings. More important, the movie recalls vividly both that era's glorious dreams and the stinging cost of idealism. These lonely souls may seem doomed, but they're still trying. And though bearing witness may not always be pretty, it is beautiful. So is *The Holdovers*." [50]

## Plagiarism accusation

In March 2024, <u>Variety</u> reported that screenwriter <u>Simon Stephenson</u> had lodged a complaint with the <u>Writers Guild of America</u>, accusing the film's screenplay of plagiarizing an unproduced script he wrote titled *Frisco*. Stephenson said that Payne had been sent his script on at least two occasions in the 2010s, and accused Hemingson's final script of being "forensically identical" to his, alleging similarities in "story, characters, structure, scenes [and] dialogue" across the "meaningful entirety" of the film. *Frisco* producer Tom McNulty questioned Stephenson's claims.

## **Accolades**

*The Holdovers* was nominated in five categories at the <u>96th Academy Awards</u>, including <u>Best Picture</u> and with Randolph winning for her performance. The film was named one of the year's top ten Films by the American Film Institute and the National Board of Review. [52][53]

For her performance as Mary Lamb, Da'Vine Joy Randolph won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, the Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Supporting Actress, the Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Supporting Actress, the BAFTA Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role, the Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actress – Motion Picture, and the New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Supporting Actress. For his performance as Paul Hunham, Paul Giamatti won the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor – Motion Picture Musical or Comedy and the Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Actor. For his performance as Angus Tully, Dominic Sessa won the Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Young Performer and was nominated for the BAFTA Award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role. [55][56][57][58]

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- The Holdovers (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14849194/) at IMDb

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