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As boomer generation's stars age, 'Hero' shows gray can still be golden

Sam Elliott shines in film about staying cool in a world that's vastly changing

Always a cool, hot guy, but never really a leading man, septuagenarian Sam Elliott is experiencing something of a renaissance.

He has re-emerged as the sexy cinematic love interest of similar-vintage grand dames: Jane Fonda in "Grace and Frankie," Lily Tomlin in "Grandma" and Blythe Danner in "I'll See You in My Dreams."

Elliott's iconic mustache has always been a veil of sorts, eliminating visual distractions from his sparkling, expressive eyes and the caressing rhythm of his drawling baritone.

In "The Hero," he stars as Lee Hayden, a former actor in movie and TV westerns who has since been reduced to commercial voiceover work.

Living in Southern California's Malibu Canyon, Lee passes time between gigs smoking weed and watching Buster Keaton movies

with his drug dealer Jeremy (Nick Offerman), a former actor in one of Lee's television series.

Jeremy's purpose as a character is to show through admiring eyes what a great actor and person Lee was and is. It is also through Jeremy that Lee meets a fellow "client," the 30-something Charlotte (Laura Prepon).

On the day he meets Charlotte, Lee has already learned the Western Appreciation and Preservation Guild wants to give him a lifetime-achievement award and receives a devastating diagnosis.

We don't know much about Lee's previous life, but the people around him reflect it. He has a fraught relationship with his daughter Lucy (Krysten Ritter)



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who is angry that he's never been part of her life. His ex-wife, Valarie (Elliott's real wife, Katherine Ross), is a successful artist who treats him with the aloofness of a high school principal sending a teenager to detention.

So when he gets the bad news, and the semigood news of the inconsequential award, he has no one to share it with. Not that he's the sharing type anyway.

From the beginning Charlotte seems edgy, vaguely sinister.

The filmmakers fittingly dwell on Lee's irresolution, not entitlement.

She doesn't give away much about herself either, as she flatters Lee with her cheekiness and douses his drink with Ecstasy as they limo toward the award venue.

Los Angeles is a city that comes alive at night. Looking out from the Hollywood Hills to the horizon, the twinkling lights give the entire landscape the semblance of an inviting nightclub. Yet in the morning, with the bright desert sun beating down in full force, the Sunset Strip looks littered and barren.

In much the same way, riding in the limousine, Lee couldn't be more handsome and confident. But things start to unravel once the event's bright lights glare down at him.

Before his death at 82, singer-songwriter and legendary ladies' man Leonard Cohen would opine on the waning of male magnetism and the experience of having young women recoil from his advances.

Lee is wondering about the same thing. He's no lothario, but Charlotte's presence doesn't quite make sense to him. The filmmakers fittingly dwell on Lee's irresolution, not entitlement.

As the baby boomers age, there has been a rivulet of movies that explore the third act of life. Members of this generation are the same people they were in 1970, just grayer and more sun-creased. The world has changed around them. What does it mean to no longer reside at the center of the universe?

Sam Elliott, who glistens in this tiny jewel of a movie, is a mellow companion for such an exploration.

He's still cool.
And he's still hot.