

## 'Merry Good Enough' Explores Dysfunction at the Holidays



**Annette Hinkle on Dec 4, 2023**

Ahh, there's nothing like the holidays. Lights on the trees, logs in the fire and carols on the radio tend to resurrect warm memories of time spent with cherished family and friends.

Sure, good cheer may abound at this time of year, but let's face it — not everyone grew up with a *Currier & Ives* Christmas.

In fact, if we're honest, most of us didn't.

Family dysfunction and difficult sibling relationships are front and center in "Merry Good Enough," the new independent film directed by Caroline Keene and Dan Kennedy that is coming out just in time for the holidays. Locally, the film will have two screenings in the coming week — the first on Sunday, December 10, at LTV Studios in Wainscott, followed by another at Sag Harbor Cinema on Sunday, December 17.

The reason for the local screenings are two of the film's stars — Raye Levine and Sawyer Spielberg, who live in New York City, but also have a home on the East End. Though the couple is married in real life, in the film, they dance at the edges of a just-budding romance in their roles as the grown children of across the street neighbors. Like many young adults in their age group, they find themselves home for the holidays, yet dealing with difficult family dynamics.

"Merry Good Enough," which takes place in Massachusetts, tells the story of 30-something Lucy Raulie (played by Levine), who lives and works in Boston, but returns to her modest childhood home in the suburbs for Christmas. Lucy is not cheerful about the prospect, mainly due to a problematic relationship with her mother, Carol (Susan Gallagher), a divorcée with a history of depression, and Lucy's two siblings, Tim (Daniel Desmarais) and Cynthia (Comfort Clinton) who are flying in from Singapore and Chicago, respectively, for the occasion.

The visit gets off to a rough start when Carol disappears on the morning of Christmas Eve after she and Lucy argue. The blame game begins as the siblings' focus shifts to piecing together the mystery of where their mother may have gone — sort of. There are also memory lane walks to take and other Christmas traditions that interrupt the search efforts. Complicating things is the arrival of the siblings' father and Carol's ex-husband, George (Joel Murray), a successful TV producer who is summoned to the homestead by Tim when the siblings run out of ideas on what to do about their missing mom.

Helping to ease Lucy's stress over the situation is neighbor Sam McGrath (Spielberg) who, like Lucy, is home for the holidays and ready to be her seasonal sounding board and a voice of reason in the mayhem.

"It's about family and acceptance with how things are," Levine explained. "And it's never too late. That's what life is really about."

This is Keene's very first feature film, and she not only co-directed it, she also wrote the script. Though she grew up in Massachusetts, where the film was shot in late 2022, she stresses that the story told in "Merry Good Enough" is not an autobiographical one.

"I realized that the plot is very fictional," said Keene during a recent phone interview that included three of the actors as well. "This idea came to me about a mother who goes missing around Christmas. With the emotions, I was drawing on the feelings I've had, but I don't think it's like watching a movie of my own life."

Keene notes that she met co-director Dan Kennedy in 2017 and clicked with him immediately. The two of them worked together on the 2020 thriller "Honeydew" (Kennedy was the cinematographer and producer, while Keene was the script supervisor). Sawyer Spielberg was one of the actors in that film, and when it came time to cast "Merry Good Enough," he immediately came to mind for the role of Sam.

"I love playing Sam, because he left home and his family story and moved to California," said Spielberg. "He removed himself from the family dysfunction and his own family system. When he comes into Lucy's life, he's removed enough from the chaos to be an anchor for Lucy while she's looking for her mom.

"It was nice to come in and play that perspective," he added. "I love the script, and the team. It's a win-win. When Caroline and Dan called us last year and said, 'Do you want to spend December in Massachusetts with us four weeks from now?' we said, 'yes.'"

While Keene and Kennedy knew that they wanted Spielberg for one of the film's key roles, discovering the depths of his wife's acting talents came as an added bonus.

"I knew Sawyer was married, but I didn't know about Raye or how great an actor she was," says Keene, who asked Levine to audition for the film.

For her part, Levine wasn't expecting much from the audition.

"I was completely surprised. I was like, OK, I guess I could audition for this role of a girl who had no lines — and is nowhere to be seen in the final movie," said Levine. "I'd be happy with any role. I said I feel very close to Lucy, but I'm sure they already have that cast. So I went in with no expectations, hearing we were on her mind."

Keene recalls that the audition took place at a coffee shop in Brooklyn where she met up with Levine and Spielberg.

"We rehearsed two of the scenes outside," said Keene. "The tone is tricky. It's comedy and drama and I was nervous about that. The scene we did was one of Raye having a conversation with her father. She yelled the line, even though there were people around. She didn't care and her face got all red and she was believable and funny and I felt like there was this immediate connection."

The audition secured Levine the lead role of Lucy in the film.

Starring as Lucy's brother, Tim, is Daniel Desmarais, an actor Keene has known since 2010, when they were both in residence at Williamstown Theatre Festival's summer program.

"There were 100 people trying to stand out. Daniel stood out immediately and effortlessly. He is also a good friend. I talked about this script with him for years, so it was surreal to call him and say, 'I want you in this movie,'" said Keene. "With casting, it's always chemistry. Each actor can be amazing, but how will they work together? Daniel and Raye have this chemistry of caring about each other, but they also get vaguely frustrated with each other."

This is Desmarais's first feature film and he's been thrilled to be a part of the project.

"Oh my gosh, it's been amazing," said Desmarais when asked about the experience. "The script Caroline wrote is so smart and so funny. She has such a strong grip on this story, that became clear day after day as we shot the film. I trusted her completely with what the final product would be."

Keene credited her co-director, Dan Kennedy, for creating that trust on set, noting that his skill and experience as a cinematographer and a producer were key to reassuring her that she was on the right track with her first feature film.

"Seeing how he shoots things and being able to talk to him after each take gave me the confidence at the end of the day," said Keene. "Dan had made a couple films. I also think we were so excited, the energy of 'I can't believe this is actually happening.'"

The film feels real in a way that many audiences will find familiar — specifically, the imperfect familial relationships that belie the colorful surface perfection of the holiday tableau.

"It felt super close to home. It felt like Caroline knew something about my family in particular," said Levine. "It's not exactly the plot points of my life, but the heart of it is there, present and fully in my family dynamics."

"The script is so perfect. I knew exactly who this girl is," added Desmarais of Levine's character of Lucy. "It's spooky how much Caroline was in our brains and how transcendent this story was."

"For me, the writing is everything and Caroline wrote a script about a family at the holidays that was so realistic," said Spielberg. "There were no clichés. Not one line, that wasn't something I haven't heard my own siblings say. When someone is so intuitive and emotionally intelligent and they write that into your stories, it's such a pleasure as an actor to be able to work on it."

In recent weeks, the team has been traveling to present screenings in locales that are special to the actors and directors, including various towns throughout New England, Desmarais's hometown of Wilmette, Illinois, and Levine and Spielberg's hometowns of New York City and the Hamptons.

"We're doing hometown screenings, so the crowd might be a little biased, but one person said, 'There were so many things in this movie that I didn't know I needed to hear,'" said Desmarais. "You can walk in and not know what your wounds are that need to be healed."

"One person came out of a screening and she was crying," said Levine. "She said, 'I feel exposed. It's like someone knows my family. Another person came out and said I'm gonna have a better Christmas.'"

"This is a really good family movie," added Spielberg. "This movie brings people together the same way the holidays do. I'm super excited to share it with everyone and I'm really proud of the performances. It's been a really inspiring journey and all the feedback consistent."

"And it's the first time Raye and I have been on screen together."

LTV Studios will screen "Merry Good Enough" on Sunday, December 10, at 7:30 p.m. The screening will be introduced by the filmmakers and there will be a post-show audience Q & A with the cast and creative team. Tickets are \$15 for general admission or \$30 for VIP, which includes one drink ticket and café table seating. Purchase tickets by texting LVMERRY TO 41444 or by visiting [bit.ly/3sEw9V5](https://bit.ly/3sEw9V5). LTV Studios is at 75 Industrial Road in Wainscott.

The film will also screen at Sag Harbor Cinema on Sunday, December 17, at 5:30 p.m. Sag Harbor Cinema is at 90 Main Street, Sag Harbor. Visit [sagharborcinema.org](https://sagharborcinema.org) for details.