

# Downsizing: Alexander Payne's take on climate change, overpopulation, social inequality ... and more

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Directed by Alexander Payne; co-written by Payne and Jim Taylor*

Alexander Payne's new film *Downsizing*, is an uneven, but engaging science-fiction satire that proposes to solve the earth's ecological and other problems by "downsizing," or physically shrinking, human beings.

The creator of such noteworthy films as *Election* (1999), *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Nebraska* (2013), Payne employs, in *Downsizing*, a generally light touch in attempting to address pressing social ills.

His film features Matt Damon and Kristen Wiig as Paul and Audrey Safranek, a lower-middle-class couple with thwarted dreams and nearly empty pockets. Paul, always having wanted to be a surgeon, is now an occupational therapist at Omaha Steaks in Omaha, Nebraska. The Safraneks' drab and financially overstretched lives render them susceptible to the claims of Norwegian scientists—who have invented a technology capable of reducing "organic material at a cellular level"—that miniaturization will solve myriad problems.

For example, the Safraneks are informed that their net worth of \$150,000 will be the equivalent of \$12 million in the tiny model community called "Leisureland." In addition, it will not only be financially advantageous to be reduced dramatically in size, but the procedure will help save the planet! Flashy sales seminars, with cameos by Neil Patrick Harris and Laura Dern, extol the virtues of being reduced to five inches high. The amusing Jason Sudeikis as Dave Johnson, connected to Paul's high school days, enthuses over his dollhouse-size existence.

Payne's film is at its drollest when it visualizes the

shrinking process. Dental fillings must be removed so heads don't explode and giant (that is, normal size) nurses transfer the newly miniaturized into tiny hospital beds with spatulas. Audrey backs out after her head and one eyebrow have been shorn, leaving her husband to sign divorce papers with a pen several times his size.

As for Paul, he soon realizes that Leisureland is not the Shangri-la he was told to expect. Not only is his Serb neighbor Dusan (a wonderful Christoph Waltz) loud and vaguely depraved (along with his friend, played by the veteran and practically inimitable German-born actor, Udo Kier), but the community is afflicted by acute social polarization, with dark slums hidden away from the glitzy moneyed class. In fact, included in Dusan's team of house-cleaning maids is Ngoc Lan Tran (Hong Chau), a one-legged Vietnamese activist shrunk against her will by the government of that country. (Chau, who was born in Thailand to Vietnamese parents, grew up in Louisiana. Unfortunately, her harsh Vietnamese accent, intended to be humorous, is mostly grating.)

As problems with "Leisureland" begin to emerge, so do the problems with *Downsizing* —it becomes somewhat unfocused and even unclear in its attitude toward climate change. Payne's movie seems finally to go off in several directions at once, none of them satisfying. However, its conclusion suggests that it's better to dig one's heels in and fight—and live—with the rest of humanity rather than bow to "the inevitable," and that seems healthy.

Payne's *Downsizing* does deliver a bite with questions such as, "Should you [tiny people] get the same rights as normal-size people?" and its references to the concerns of Homeland Security: shrinking

“illegal immigrants” and “terrorists” will make breaching American borders that much easier!

Payne, born in 1961 in Omaha, Nebraska to a Greek-American immigrant family, has been one of the more interesting satirists working in the American film industry for two decades, since *Citizen Ruth* (1996), about the debate in the US over abortion rights. He has demonstrated a particular interest in and acuity about social and psychological life in “Middle America.”

His *Election* featured the memorably abominable Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon), “a conniving, ambitious and devoid-of-principles high school student,” as we noted on the WSWS, and the well-intentioned, hapless Mr. McAllister (Matthew Broderick) in “a lampoon of the American political landscape.” Flick, a sharp and amusing film creation, aspires to be student body president and at one point appeals to “Dear Lord Jesus” to “go that one last mile and make sure to put me in office where I belong so that I may carry out your will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.”

*About Schmidt*, “one of the few current movies that tries honestly to offer social satire and criticism,” and *Nebraska*, which concerned itself “with the bleak lives of decent people without prospects,” have been other high points of Payne’s career.

In interviews about *Downsizing*, Payne pointed to the multiple issues that were on his and screenwriter Jim Taylor’s minds. He told *Variety*, “It’s a summing up of all the themes that I’ve been working with. ... There’s the look at class in America, there’s political satire, a humanist point of view. ...

“I liked the idea of trying to solve the world’s greatest problem through something as preposterous as miniaturization. But when you think about it, there’s no better solution. If we are going down—and it sure looks that way—what are we supposed to do? Colonize another planet? Allow plague, food riots, starvation and natural disaster to just kill us all off?”

“Now, with our horrible times, we need horror films like we did in the ’50s,” he says. “No other genre does a better job of conveying a type of collective anxiety. You look around and think it’s probably a good idea to remake *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.”

In regard to Donald Trump’s plan to build a wall on the US-Mexico border and its echo in *Downsizing*, Payne told *Esquire* that “a lot of the elements of the

screenplay have more significance now: the wall that surrounds Leisureland, and the [fact that] the Mexicans and Central Americans who work in Leisureland live on the other side of that wall. We had no idea that the wall would acquire significance.”

In any case, of course, there are “better solutions” to the “world’s greatest problems,” and one suspects Payne knows that, but the filmmaker is better at this point at feeling and intuiting those problems than at theoretically grasping them. *Downsizing* sticks in one’s memory less because of the depth of its analysis than its slightly muddled, chaotic, well-meaning, bemused, troubled concern for humanity and its future.

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