Netflix’ *Living with Yourself* with Paul Rudd: The divided self … from A to B

By David Walsh
30 October 2019

*Living with Yourself* is an eight-episode television series that premiered on Netflix October 18. It was created by Timothy Greenberg (executive producer of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) and directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris (*Little Miss Sunshine*).

The comedy-drama concerns a middle-aged marketing copywriter, Miles Elliot (Paul Rudd), who feels “stuck” and seeks help from a spa in a strip mall that promises its clients better lives. He takes $50,000 from a joint banking account to pay for the firm’s services.

In fact, as it turns out, the spa’s business model involves cloning its clients and “de-activating” (i.e., disposing of) the originals, so that only the duplicates are left. The latter, complete with the exact physical structure and memories of the original, never know that they are clones, and simply feel “cleansed” and recharged.

In Miles’ case, however, the “old Miles” survives due to the spa employees’ ineptness or lack of resources. (“Ideally,” he is told later, “we grind, then dissolve in acid solution, but we had maintenance problems. The difficulties of getting parts from Korea, you wouldn’t believe. So, for now, we bury the de-activees in the state forest. …”) He makes his way back to the home he shares with his wife, Kate (Aisling Bea), an architect. Now there are two Mileses, who have to make the best of their complicated situation.

Miles and his wife have been having difficulties for some time. They moved to the suburbs to start a family, but Kate had a miscarriage and subsequent efforts have not succeeded. Miles has been postponing a visit to a fertility clinic for months. At work too, he only goes through the motions. He runs the risk of being superseded by more energetic rivals.

The “old Miles” is bored, depressed, faltering at his job. “New Miles” makes an instant impression at work, cooks an elaborate dinner for his wife, generally outdoes the original. “Old Miles” asks his clone to assist him at work for a week, until an important presentation, for a telecommunications company, has been completed. He worries that the duplicate is “better than me,” as he tells his half-sister (Alia Shawkat), “in everything. With work, with you, with Kate.”

His duplicate has his own issues. Once Kate discovers his existence, she bans him from the house. “Old Miles” wants him to travel. By this time, however, the unhappy clone has fallen for “his” wife. He even sneaks into the couple’s bedroom, cuts off a lock of Kate’s hair and tries to convince the spa team to clone her too. Only to be told: “You want us to clone a client from a hair sample without her consent? … We provide a service for clients. We don’t manufacture humans for your pleasure. Besides, two of the same person is a bad scene in case you hadn’t noticed. … Did you see that sign out front? We had to shut down the entire branch thanks to you. I’m out of work, man. You gonna pay my rent? Even you being here is dangerous. Uh, corporate doesn’t like us. They are not nice people.”

So it seems a gift from heaven when Kate’s discontent eventually leads her to start an affair (not very successfully) with her own husband’s clone!

In a murky scene, “old Miles” contrives by underhanded means to win a town hall vote that means a great deal of money for his new client. During a break, for the benefit of a group of potential voters, he invents a grandfather who was made ill by the competitor’s firm: “He’d leased his land. Not to an American company. His neighbors had American ones [cell phone towers] for years and never had a problem.
No, this was like some international conglomerate who put up foreign-built towers. Conglomerate was called Broadspan. Ray, you asked me why I was here? Simple. It’s to make sure that what happened to my grandpa doesn’t happen to anybody else ever again.” What are we to make of this cynical and discreditable maneuver? The series seems oddly even-handed.

In any event, original Miles decides he wants his old life back, and everything that might come with it. The season ends with Kate’s announcement that she is pregnant and there is no way of knowing who the father is because, of course, the two Mileses have identical DNA.

There are some amusing, intriguing things here. Rudd is an appealing performer throughout. Film technology has reached a point where the co-existence on screen of the two Mileses, including in an extended sequence where they fight and roll around on the floor, is entirely seamless and convincing.

There are hints now and then of something urgent, more serious. In an odd scene, the elderly corporate chief (Jerry Adler) whose account Miles is seeking to secure, and who suspects that something questionable is going on, recounts a terrible episode that occurred in a concentration camp where he was a prisoner as a child. “So, you see I don’t mind a cheater,” he concludes. “But if you’re gonna cheat, do it right.” What are we to make of that? The same executive later has a pig carcass delivered to Miles’s home. (“Mangalitsa is a rare breed of pig. Brought it over from Hungary. Nothing like it in the entire world.”) Some of the red herrings or loose ends seem to point to their future development if the series continues for more seasons.

Kate has the opportunity to tell a wealthy, arrogant client (who has made a fortune from online dating) that his demands are absurd “because they have nothing to do with the things in your life that make you feel, and not unreasonably, like a complete waste of space.” The series also hints at corporate malfeasance and filthiness.

A good deal of time and effort has gone into Living with Yourself. The images are crisp in the manner of contemporary web television.

The series is pleasant enough, and occasionally witty. But the surreal premise, which has potential, is never genuinely explored.

Indeed, when one writes “The series is pleasant enough,” its significant inadequacy rushes to the fore. What’s weakest, in the end, is that there is so little to distinguish “old Miles” from his “better self.” Both work in the same miserable, pointless field. Both lead essentially mediocre, middle class existences. Both have the most limited, self-involved outlooks on life and the world.

For plot reasons presumably, a type of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde relationship is excluded. But something, aside from hair-style and facial expression, ought to set the two characters apart. One continues to hold out hope until the final moment that something emotionally or socially convulsive will occur.

In the end, there is something terribly conventional and unthreatening about this. In the future, people are likely to look back and wonder at the great limitations and unpreparedness for what was to come of the vast majority of today’s film and television artists.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org