



**“PEEGE” (1972)**  
**Essay by Daniel Eagan**

Instructional films make up a large but mostly hidden part of the movie world. In an admittedly arbitrary distinction from educational and industrial films, instructionals include how-to movies, training films, and those designed to promote discussion in group settings. Filmmakers as celebrated as John Ford and the Fleischer brothers tackled the genre, which remains a viable way to break into the industry.

A Pennsylvania native who attended high school on Philadelphia’s Main Line, Randal Kleiser came to USC to study film when he was eighteen. In addition to his classes, Kleiser made something of a career as an actor in commercials and as a stand-in. In a 1974 interview, he described the work as “an excellent way to learn about lighting and staging.” He completed seven student films, including the award-winning “Hands in Innocent” (1969).

The Directors Guild Foundation helped finance “Peege,” which was based on Kleiser’s life in 1972. He used a visit he made with his family to his ailing grandmother in a nursing home as the basis for a half-hour screenplay. Casting director Joel Thurm got the script to Bruce Davison, who had run track with Kleiser at Radnor High School. As the star of “Willard” (1971), a horror movie that was a surprise box-office hit, Davison was a legitimate celebrity, and his decision to act in “Peege” made casting the rest of the film considerably easier.

The title role went to Jeanette Nolan, a veteran actress whose film debut was as Lady Macbeth in Orson Welles' "Macbeth" (1948). She played a fictional version of Kleiser's grandmother during five different time periods. In a later interview, Kleiser remembered how Nolan researched blindness to enact Peege's last days, and decided to remove her false teeth at times to adjust her physical appearance. Barbara Rush, who played the mother in the family, also had a significant film career, having starred with actors like Paul Newman and Marlon Brando. Kleiser remembers casting William Schallert after seeing him as the father on TV's "The Patty Duke Show," similarly, Barry Livingston was cast as one of the sons in part because of his recurring role on TV's "My Three Sons."

Financing suddenly became easier as well. Kleiser met David Knapp, an ambitious associate producer who was looking for a producing credit. He was working on "Something Evil" (1971), a TV movie directed by Steven Spielberg, and had extra office space he made available to Kleiser. Eventually the producer and director assembled enough financing to hire a forty-man crew. But, even though they were shooting on 16mm instead of costlier 35mm. Kleiser had to cut corners as much as possible.

Locations included an apartment lobby, which was disguised as a nursing home waiting room at Christmas time, and actor Scott Glenn's home, borrowed for a flashback scene that needed a working fireplace. Topanga Canyon passed for suburban Philadelphia. The main location was a Veterans Administration facility that was facing demolition. This became the nursing home bedroom where Greg (Davison), a college student visiting from California, first realizes how much his grandmother's health has deteriorated.

The core of "Peege" is a private encounter in which Greg draws out his grandmother, who has become frail and nonresponsive, by summoning up their shared memories. Kleiser shot much of the scene in a tight two-shot, a set-up Davison recalled using in one of his later films, "Longtime Companion" (1990).

Throughout "Peege," Kleiser isolates details – a catheter tube, crumbs on the floor - without commenting on them, building an atmosphere of polite dread. In a half-hour span he worked in five unobtrusive flashbacks (one of which actually covers three separate time periods). Kleiser's most sophisticated work comes when Greg leaves Peege's room, and, by extension, her life. Here, as in other

scenes, the moving camera adopts a subjective viewpoint that draws viewers into the moment.

“Peege” premiered at a repertory theater in Los Angeles, and attracted enough attention to get Kleiser representation at the Creative Management Associates talent agency. CMA took the film to Universal, which declined to distribute it, but the studio did offer Kleiser a nonexclusive contract. His first professional employment was directing an episode of “Marcus Welby, M.D.”

Kleiser entered “Peege” in the Atlanta Film Festival, where it was seen by Barbara Bryant and Heinz Gelles. They had just formed Phoenix Films & Video, dedicated to supplying films to libraries, universities, and special interest groups. They offered to distribute “Peege,” and according to Kleiser, have been responsible for getting the film to a surprisingly wide audience. They also helped finance a sequel of sorts, “Portrait of Grandpa Doc” (1977), a fictional account of Kleiser’s paternal grandfather.

Over the years the film has been used in medical schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and high schools and universities as a way of introducing points of discussion in gerontology studies. Professors have developed detailed analysis of the film’s characters and their motives in study aids. Kleiser, on the other hand, was more interested in recapturing a moment in his life than in presenting a case study that covered educational issues. Production photos show how intently he mimicked specific visual details from his home and family.

Now centered in St. Louis, the Phoenix Learning Group, Inc., still distributes both “Peege” and “Portrait of Grandpa Doc.” Kleiser’s career has included such box-office hits as “Grease” (1978) as well as “Honey, I Shrunk the Audience (1994), a site-specific 3-D short shown at Disneyland.

“Peege” was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2007.

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