

Goodbye Solo

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue



An old Senegalese proverb says, “An elder who dies is like a library that burns.” This belief is at the heart of the small but moving independent film *Goodbye Solo*, directed and co-written by Ramin Bahrani. It’s also the conviction that drives the main character, Solo (Souléymané Sy Savané), an upbeat Senegalese immigrant to the U.S.

While driving a cab in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Solo encounters the grim William (Red West), a 70-year-old who is losing his grip on life. After a late-night ride home, William makes a proposition. In two weeks he wants the young cabbie to drive him up to Blowing Rock, a mountain ledge outside of Winston-Salem, and leave him there. It seems clear that William means to end it all. Solo makes it his mission to convince the old man that his life still has meaning.

In the meantime, we get to know Solo, a cheery dreamer who lives with Quiera (Carmen Leyva), his tough-as-nails Latina wife, who is pregnant with his child, and with Quiera’s nine-year-old stepdaughter, Alex (Diana Franco Galindo). Solo’s goal is to become a flight attendant, a profession that would allow him to escape the confines of his taxi and soar through the skies. We are also introduced to other immigrants—cabbies, assorted drug dealers and various merchants, many of whom gather at the local bar where Solo’s ex-wife serves drinks.

The more we learn about Solo, the less we seem to know about William, who is shuffling through his days with the demeanor of a death-row inmate. We get only an occasional glimpse into his past via a random photo of a boy who works at the local movie theater and a few scrawled journal entries.

With all the gumption of the angel Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Solo tries to drag William back from the abyss. He becomes his regular driver, allows William to move into his house for a spell, becomes William's roommate at a motel when Quiera kicks them both out, and allows him to get to know Alex, who, like Solo, is bursting with life.

Much of the film's success rests with the lead actors. Savané is a former model from the Ivory Coast. He has never acted in films before, but his smiling face and enticing laugh are perfect for the role. West is a longtime character actor, though he is best known for being a close friend and bodyguard of Elvis Presley and a key member of Presley's infamous Memphis Mafia. The two create a contrasting world of black and white, hope and despair, the beginning and the end.

Bahrani's previous two films, *Man Push Cart* and *Chop Shop*, also dealt with the immigrant experience in America. *Good bye Solo* moves beyond the immigrant story to consider larger questions of morality. If it is human kind's responsibility to extend a helping hand to those who are lost, Bahrani asks, when is it time to let go?