



Sideways

Director: Alexander Payne
Country: USA
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A review by Peter Bradshaw for The Guardian:

New classics of American cinema don't come along that often, so grab this one with both hands. It's an occasion for the singing of hosannas from the roof of every cinema. Director Alexander Payne has already given us two gems with *Election* and *About Schmidt*. This glorious, bittersweet comedy of male friendship and midlife crisis is even better. It's something to be compared with John Cassavetes or Hal Ashby or Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*; a particular kind of freewheeling film-making that hasn't surfaced for decades.



Sideways is beautifully written, terrifically acted; it is paced and constructed with such understated mastery that it is a sort of miracle. The observations are pitilessly exact and meshed with impeccably executed sight gags and funny lines, and everything is bathed in the solvent of exquisite sadness. Yet its gentleness and humanity do not preclude a mule-kick of emotional power. Audiences at the screenings where I have been present may have heard something like a fusillade of gunshots from the auditorium; it was the sound of my heart breaking into a thousand pieces.

Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church give the performances of their lives, complemented by two outstanding female leads: Sandra Oh and Virginia Madsen. Giamatti is Miles, the divorced English teacher and would-be novelist well into his 40s, who is staring failure full in the face. Church plays his buddy and old college roommate Jack: a handsome-ish actor and incorrigible "pussyhound" whose career washed up after a couple of TV shows 10 years before.

With many a suppressed bachelor's misgiving, he is about to get married, and acquire some rich Armenian-American in-laws who want him to leave showbusiness and come in with them in their fabulously lucrative property business. Jack is still in the process of kidding himself that he can do that and still keep the door open to getting back into movies. For his part, Miles is kidding himself that his ex-wife might still want to make another go of it.

The pair of them, deep in denial about the way their lives are turning out, go on a road trip. It is Miles's "wedding gift" to Jack: he will take him on a tour of the Californian wine country, and teach him about the passion for wine that has taken over his life. Secretly, he is hoping for a little male bonding to salve his wretched loneliness. But all Jack is hoping for is some bedroom action with local women before he has to tie the knot - and Miles cloaks his desolate feelings of betrayal with righteous disgust. All he can do to manage his despair is concentrate on the new love of his life: wine.

Jonathan Nossiter's documentary *Mondovino* was recently much praised for its insights into the globo-Californian wine business; but for me, *Sideways* says more on the subject in five minutes than Nossiter managed in two hours. Miles loves pontificating at tastings, and comes up with the most uproarious wine-snobbisms since James Thurber's famous line: "It's a naive domestic burgundy, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption." Miles fastidiously sips a Cabernet and pronounces it: "Quaffable but far from transcendent." To Jack's bemusement, he rolls another vintage around his palate and claims to detect hints of strawberry, asparagus, and Dutch Edam. "The strawberries ... yeah ... " agrees Jack, having earnestly tasted it himself, " ... but not the cheese." Miles identifies with Pinot grape because it's delicate and sensitive like him, but it's only when he meets beautiful, divorced Maya - an excellent performance from Virginia Madsen - that he finds a kindred wine-loving spirit and someone who might redeem his sorry life.

Some of the brilliance of Payne's film is that he presents Miles's passion for wine with no obvious signposting as to what we should think about it, and lets an awful thought dawn unassisted. Miles's oenophilia might simply be a very elaborate way of dressing up the banal problem of alcoholism. Two banal problems, if you count incipient depression. Miles has created a complete and complex culture in which his drinking can be made to seem like something with status. And now that his buddy is getting married and leaving him alone in his wretched world of singledom, he somehow needs Jack's benediction and understanding of his new monkish vocation for drinking away what remains of his life.

Yet it is a measure of the humanity and sympathy of this film that this explanation would not be entirely fair. Poor, battered Miles - devastated by the failure of his marriage and the rejection of his novel - has at least found a genuine passion. There is an extraordinary moment when, stunned by the news that his ex-wife has in fact remarried, Miles can find comfort only in stroking grapes: a bizarre image that Payne somehow makes sad and irresistibly funny at once.



The sadness is balanced with wonderfully observed comedy as Jack embarks on a crazy affair with Stephanie (Sandra Oh), a pourer from one of the wineries, and finally has a one-night stand with a diner waitress whose husband makes an unwelcome appearance. The upshot is a scene of hilarious, nail-biting tension.

Alexander Payne has raised his game very satisfyingly with this film, taking his familiar preoccupation with male menopausal angst and giving it a new gentleness, richness and maturity. Sideways now has five Oscar nominations: including one for best picture. It is light years ahead of the preening, pumped-up competitors in this category (The Aviator, Finding Neverland, Million Dollar Baby and Ray). We can only hope.

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