

Youth on the go

Rushmore, a film directed by Wes Anderson, written by Anderson and Owen Wilson

David Walsh
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Rushmore suggests a place for American heroes in a hurry.* Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), whose own name conjures up a Nobel Prize-winning physicist or a precocious chess champion, attends Rushmore, a private school somewhere in America. Far from giving into fashionable lethargy and sloth, Max is very active. He belongs to (or runs) the debating club, the French club, the beekeeping club, the flying club, the gun club, the chess club, the astronomy club, the calligraphy club, the fencing team, the Junior Varsity decathlon team, the school paper and more. He's at Rushmore on a scholarship; his father is a barber, although Max tells everyone he's a brain surgeon. Max is short, wears glasses and braces, and dresses nattily in the school blazer. Unfortunately, he's not a good student and faces the imminent end of his Rushmore career.

Does Max keep so active to ward off despondency? Who knows, but he responds to a brief, misanthropic speech given to the assembled student body by Herman Blume** (Bill Murray), a millionaire and Rushmore alumnus-supporter. Blume has two dreadful sons and a wife he doesn't care for. He seems on the verge of mentally checking out. When he jumps into a swimming pool he would like to stay submerged if he possibly could. He and Max strike up a friendship. Blume looks up to Max, who is always on the go.

Max, 15, develops a crush on an elementary school teacher and young widow, Rosemary Cross (Olivia Williams). He begins doing things for her, like bringing her lemonade, buying exotic fish and building (with Blume's money) an \$8 million aquarium on the school's baseball diamond. (Max is not easily diverted. When the teacher tells him that a relationship between the two of them is out of the question, he responds, "I

understand, you're not attracted to me. *C'est la vie!*") For the last activity he gets expelled from Rushmore. Blume develops an interest in Miss Cross too, which sets the two men against one another for a time. They both have nasty and underhanded streaks. In one scene, for example, Max shows up at the teacher's window at night, claiming to have been struck by a car while riding his bicycle. While she goes to fetch some water for his fake wound, he hops on her bed and in the same motion pops some French *chanteur* in the tape-deck. However, Miss Cross, who's actually very sweet, can take care of herself, one feels.

Filmmakers Anderson and Wilson (*Bottle Rocket*, 1996) obviously feel that young people have gotten a bad name, and they are determined to set the record straight. I think they're on to something. As a rule adolescents don't want to sit around and do nothing; they're burning up with energy, plans, loyalty, love. Max may suffer from a few delusions--he tells Miss Cross, for example, that he's applying to Oxford and the Sorbonne, with Harvard as a fall-back--but he is capable of extraordinary things too. We learn that he was admitted to Rushmore on the basis of a one-act play he wrote in the second grade about Watergate. He has founded and operates his own theater company, the Max Fischer Players. The snatches of his plays we see are some of my favorite moments in the film.

First, there's a version of *Serpico*, with a young boy dressed as a nun acting as a look-out for an undercover police operation. Max plays some kind of lowlife in sunglasses in a second piece. The third play, entitled *Heaven and Hell*, seems loosely inspired by Oliver Stone's overwrought Vietnam drama *Heaven and Earth*, among other things. Max gets school bully

Magnus Buchan***, whose Scottish accent makes it difficult for American ears to grasp his curses and threats, to play a leading role in the last piece. Max also casts Margaret Yang, who has a crush on him, as a Vietnamese freedom fighter and potential love interest. The theater pieces are immaculately done miniatures.

Bill Murray is excellent as the wilted and then flowering Blume in *Love*. He is one of the best American performers around in any medium. Seymour Cassel is memorable as Max's humbled but supportive father. Schwartzman is remarkable as the energetic, large-minded but imperfect Max.

Anderson and Wilson, who attended the University of Texas together, have made a film with something very human and charming about it. In passing, *Rushmore* makes the point that people of all sorts can get along. It also makes a compelling argument for honesty, earnestness and obsession. At times the film grows self-consciously quirky and it raises some tricky problems that the filmmakers are perhaps ill-equipped to treat, but as a whole, it is a delight.

* Mount Rushmore rises 5,600 feet in the Black Hills in South Dakota. Gutzon Borglum carved 60-foot portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt in its granite face from 1925-41.

** Businessman Hermann Karlovich, who suffers a breakdown, is the central figure in Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*; Jewish Dubliner Leopold Bloom is the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

*** John Buchan was a talented Scottish adventure writer (*The Thirty-Nine Steps*, 1915) and proponent of British imperialist bullying; later governor-general of Canada.



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