

Perhaps a step backward

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Sideways, directed by Alexander Payne; written by Payne and Jim Taylor, based on the novel by Rex Pickett

Director Alexander Payne has ventured outside his native Nebraska—the location of his previous works (*Election*, *About Schmidt*)—in *Sideways*, a film set in the vineyard territory of California’s Santa Barbara County.

The combination “buddy/road” film, based on the 1999 novel by Rex Pickett, makes certain points about the malaise and dysfunction permeating, perhaps saturating, Middle America. But in general, *Sideways* seems softer and less focused than Payne’s previous work. It relies on more conventional means to “win the spectator’s heart”—usually an unfortunate sign.

Miles (Paul Giamatti) and Jack (Thomas Haden Church) head out to the wine country from southern California for a one-week, bachelor-party-type trip before Jack’s marriage to the daughter of a nouveau-rich Armenian businessman. The former college roommates are incongruous best friends: Miles, an English school teacher, is a nerdy pedant with an impeccable wine palate, while Jack, a handsome former soap opera actor, uses wine and women as means of immediate self-gratification.

Miles’s 750-page manuscript is making the rounds of small New York publishing houses that have twice rejected his efforts. As a result of his divorce two years ago and other disappointments, he has been plying himself with anti-depressants.

The duo leaves San Diego in Miles’s beat-up Saab, making a stop to visit Miles’s mother, and eventually situating themselves at Miles’s favorite motel in the environs of the vineyards. Wine tasting and golf are what Miles intends for the prenuptial sojourn. He wants to sensitize Jack to the structure and concentration of the grape, to open him up to the pleasures, both weighty and trivial, of being an oenophile.

Jack, however, is on the hunt for casual sex, hoping he can bag catches for both of them. He sets up a double date with Maya (Virginia Madsen), an adult graduate student moonlighting as a waitress, and Stephanie (Sandra Oh), a winery employee. Like a jackrabbit, Jack pairs off with Stephanie, while Miles, paralyzed with depression and self-doubt, dodges Maya’s tentative approaches. An equally susceptible and wounded creature—not to mention a wine aficionado—Maya would obviously fit Miles perfectly.

But for a relationship to take place, Miles will have to make a nervous peace with what he perceives to be the disappointing trajectory of his life. His cherished Pinot grape is an obvious metaphor for a somewhat unbalanced and self-serving self-image: thin-skinned, difficult to handle and potentially sublime. In the end, he will have to struggle with the twin demons of under/over-self-estimation relative to societal expectations. Maya, the real deal, is the catalyst and presumably a future partner in this process. The film ends on a positive note.

Rather than confronting life head-on, both Miles and Jack—despite their apparently disparate intellectual and moral compasses—tackle it sideways. The road movie genre itself contains what one critic describes as “the eternal American desire to drop everything and light out for the territories.”

Miles lives vicariously through the grape, obsessively viewing himself as a brainy misfit. Jack believes that placing Miles at the center of his life absolves him from thinking. He is therefore freed to plug up his psychic holes with whatever superficial diversion comes his way. Representing more the norm than the exception, Jack, despite his financially secure future (working for his wealthy father-in-law), has far less of a chance at happiness than Miles.

Sideways carefully establishes certain signposts: Miles’s artlessly depressing apartment in “The Sea

Crest”; his mother’s gaudy, lower middle class—but clueless—pretensions; the faux-Tudor façade of Miles’s preferred wine-tasting establishment. And then there is Miles’s novel (“It sort of devolves into a Robbe-Grillet thing”), entitled *The Day after Yesterday*, which, as Maya points out, is merely an overblown way of saying “Today.”

The film contains some telling sequences. A subtle one occurs when, toward the film’s end, Miles’s students are enthusiastically reading their assignments, obviously inspired by a teacher who inattentively—and dejectedly—is slumped at his desk. Previously, upon hearing of his latest manuscript rejection, Miles bemoans: “I’m not a writer; I’m a middle school English teacher. I’m so insignificant I can’t even kill myself.... Half my life is over and I have nothing to show for it...‘a smug piece of excrement floating out to sea.’ ” Miles is quoting from American writer Charles Bukowski, who famously declared: “The words I write keep me from total madness.”

In another self-effacing declaration, Miles states: “I’m a fingerprint on the window of a skyscraper.”

Unfortunately, on the whole, the movie is slight and complacent. Despite the genuine talents of actor Giamatti, *Sideways* is too consumed with the “lovable loser” syndrome. Verging on sentimentality at times, it is a weaker work than either *Election* or *About Schmidt*, which both contained more acute social criticism. The former had some sharp insights into the types of personalities who “get ahead” in American politics; the latter about a vast swath of dissatisfying, frustrating American lives. There is far less to go on here.

Shedding light on this limitation, the film’s co-writer Jim Taylor explains in an interview that both he and Payne “find it more interesting to look at the small heroisms in people’s lives as opposed to some kind of really grand heroism, like pulling someone out of a car wreck, going underwater. Just making it from day to day is more interesting to us.”

This is fairly insubstantial. Although making it from day to day is becoming qualitatively more painful and insecure in America and should be addressed by artists, there is something condescending in Taylor’s remark—as if minutia is all that can be expected from the general population. In any event, why is making it day to day, by implication, a heroic act? Might not that be something worth investigating?

Under the present social circumstances, the filmmakers are in danger of missing out on the bigger questions, left behind to record the small of change of life. In any case, thin gruel is still thin gruel, regardless of how artfully it is offered up.

Concerning Payne’s previous movie, *About Schmidt*, this reviewer wrote: “A more serious weakness is that the film’s main emphasis is on personal foibles and individual failings, rather than on a failed society and a failed culture. Payne appears torn between a genuine social critique and scorn for those who are less intelligent and cultured. The director is leaving his hometown of Omaha to take up filmmaking in Hollywood, harboring aspirations of becoming a Billy Wilder-type satirist. He faces a good many pitfalls.”

In an online interview with *Dark Horizons*, Payne states that with his current artistic stature he has the opportunity to change cinema in such a way that the studios will be convinced that “human films”—an all-too amorphous designation—can be profitable. It appears with *Sideways* that he has lost some ground to Hollywood.



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