

The Darjeeling Limited from Wes Anderson: It's time to do more interesting work

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Directed by Wes Anderson, screenplay by Anderson, Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman

Wes Anderson is an American filmmaker who has created certain expectations. He established himself as intriguing with his 1998 film, *Rushmore*, a stylized picture of the resourcefulness and energy of youth. With his amiable, amusing *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), about a household of child geniuses who never grow up, Anderson, however, began to run the risk of becoming a harmless iconoclast. His 2004 *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* focused on the alienation and fragility inherent in social and family relations in an imaginative but limited manner. Still, one awaits the appearance of his films with interest.

Family angst and dysfunction are some of Anderson's signature themes. His latest film, *The Darjeeling Limited*, again pursues these concerns as three estranged brothers attempt to reconnect while train-traveling in India. Although exhibiting his trademark aesthetic—a stretched realism among other surreal sensibilities—Anderson's new film is less urgent and coherent than his previous efforts.

Like the private school in *Rushmore*, the ramshackle New York City mansion in *The Royal Tenenbaums* and the makeshift sea vessel in *The Life Aquatic*, Anderson's exotic train in *The Darjeeling Limited* plays an active role. It is the moving center of the claustrophobic world of the Whitman brothers, a trio of wealthy Americans attempting a spiritual journey after the death of their father. ("We're just trying to experience something.")

Francis (Owen Wilson), the eldest, has organized the odyssey in a first-class sleeper car on the "Darjeeling Limited" after a near-fatal motorcycle accident left him longing for his siblings. (The fact that the head-bandaged Francis is an uncomfortable reminder of Wilson's much-publicized attempted suicide last August has been universally noted.) With a daily itinerary—laminated by a personal assistant—Francis imperiously orders around brothers Peter (Adrien Brody) and Jack (Jason Schwartzman).

Reportedly, the naming of the brothers is something of a private joke, referring to directors Francis Ford Coppola and Peter Bogdanovich and actor Jack Nicholson, who were friends in the 1970s. Unhappily, this bit of film industry insiderism

points to a wider problem.

Peter is anxiety-ridden due to impending fatherhood, while the youngest, Jack, a depressive writer, uses his family as grist for the mill in his novels and stories. He has just ended a relationship with an enigmatic girlfriend (played by Natalie Portman) in a Paris episode recorded in the 13-minute short, *Hotel Chevalier*, which functions as the film's prologue and back-story. A fourth inanimate Whitman tags along—the film's infamous Louis Vuitton suitcases. It turns out that the elaborately decorated leather valises are the materialized psychological baggage inherited by the brothers from their parents. The healing process for the impaired Whitmans involves tracking down their absentee mother, Patricia (Angelica Huston), who has joined a convent in the Himalayas.

Where feather-burying and temple-worshipping fail, rescuing two local children from drowning succeeds in giving the Whitmans some perspective. Tragically, a third Indian boy is not saved, but his traditional funeral gives the film its only grounded sequence. It also introduces what seems to have been lacking in the Whitmans' life—a model, caring patriarch (Irfan Khan).

The brothers finally track down their mother, now Sister Patricia, who is reluctant to meet them. Her disengaged manner appears to be the source of many of the family's tribulations. In her watery eyes can be read a disappointment at being unable to nurture, although she is an Angel of Mercy to the locals. The segment in the remote mountain convent brings to mind the banal adage that charity begins at home.

Bill Murray also makes a brief appearance as an unnamed businessman who misses the "Darjeeling" train. It's an extraneous bit presumably intended to maintain Murray's continuity as an Anderson staple—or perhaps to offer a momentary glimpse of what the Whitmans' absent, businessman father might be like?

The film rambles on without a great deal of cohesiveness, humor or chemistry between the characters. There are some genuine moments. Amara Karan as Rita, a steward on the train with whom Jack has a brief fling, is most memorable. But, as a whole, the drama and the characters feel seriously undeveloped.

After *Rushmore*, which impressed with its offbeat humor and ingenious settings, the strength of Anderson's next two films

primarily lay in the remarkable presences of Gene Hackman, Bill Murray and Cate Blanchett. Without a dynamic personality to carry a good deal of the sardonic-ironic, semi-tragic emotional weight, the limited character of Anderson's approach comes to the fore.

Life is odd and uneven; people are imperfect and contradictory in their desires and behavior; reality, therefore, is more reliably grasped by looking at it from unusual angles, through mediation, through "distance" and literariness ... this seems to be the 'Anderson touch,' and it has its charms, but it is also wearing a little thin by now. The world is complex and dangerous and full of possibility—perhaps the filmmaker should take a second or third look?

There is also more than a whiff of condescension in the film's treatment of its peripheral Indian characters. The train's steward is stupidly oblivious to being cuckolded by the lothario, Jack. Then there is Peter's remark: "I love the way this country smells. I'll never forget it. It's kind of spicy."

The issue here is this: if *The Darjeeling Limited* is intended as a satirical dig at the illusions, self-importance, ignorance and narcissism of its three central figures, it pulls its punches and fails. One has the sense that Anderson wants to bring out their foolishness, without making them entirely unattractive characters. Such a thing could be done, but it would mean a sharper approach at both ends of the problem, so to speak: a more clearly delineated social criticism of these petty bourgeois misfits and, at the same time, an appreciation of their essentially good intentions and humanity. Neither element is adequately developed. The result: neither fish nor fowl.

Presumably Anderson wants us to conclude that the death of the Indian boy helps the brothers to think about something aside from themselves, brings them out of themselves somewhat. But does it? The director wants to avoid an unconvincing transformation, but there hardly seems to be an impact at all.

Anderson is certainly on the wrong track when he claims his movie owes a debt to *The River*, Jean Renoir's 1951 film about three teenage girls in Bengal. Also meant as a tribute is the score for *The Darjeeling Limited*, which features music composed by one of India's great filmmakers, Satyajit Ray. Anderson's penchant for the idiosyncratic runs counter to the preoccupation with *real social life* in the classic filmmaking of Renoir and Ray.

In the movie's production notes, Anderson says that "I decided I would like to make a movie in India, I decided I would like to make a movie on a train, and I thought I'd like to make a movie about three brothers. Then I asked my friends Jason Schwartzman and Roman Coppola to join me in writing the movie and we all went to India." While one cannot entirely take a director who so deliberately remakes reality at face value, Anderson's blasé facade is starting to catch up with him. *The Darjeeling Limited* is essentially a sloppy and careless work, repeating elements from previous works, such as an

idealized train reminiscent of *The Life Aquatic's* compartmentalized boat. In the "fashionable" guise of being the maker of careless and sloppy films, the filmmaker has *actually made* a careless and sloppy film.

The film does not engage in any serious way with life in India. Actor Brody states in the production notes that "the thing about India is that life is very precarious there and everywhere you turn you are seeing people on the verge of death." Apart from the scene of the drowning, which is an accident, there are no verge-of-death images or moments in the movie.

In a September article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "Quirked Around," Michael Hirschorn writes about Anderson and others. He comments that "As an aesthetic principle, quirk is an embrace of the odd against the blandly mainstream. It features mannered ingenuousness, an embrace of small moments, narrative randomness, situationally amusing but not hilarious character juxtapositions ... and unexplainable but nonetheless charming character traits. Quirk takes not mattering very seriously."

Hirschorn ends by saying that "It's harder to construct a coherent universe that has something to say about contemporary life."

This is undoubtedly the case, and Anderson's limitations have to be seen in the context of the unfavorable filmmaking climate in which he emerged. His *Rushmore*, like David O. Russell's *I Heart Huckabees* and Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich*, could be interpreted as offering opposition to the 'blandly mainstream' under certain conditions. But the mainstream has been discredited in many ways, politically and otherwise. The population has gone beyond that, it needs new ideas and feelings and alternatives, which will help in its newly radicalized but often confused state.

There is no need for Anderson to succumb to preciousness and archness. He is smart and he has eyes in his head. He can and should do something more interesting.



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