

Moonrise Kingdom: Wes Anderson's latest wispy, wistful adventure

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Directed by Wes Anderson; screenplay by Anderson and Roman Coppola

Wes Anderson is an American filmmaker with a distinctive approach to art and life, somewhat off-kilter, absurd and humane. His most notable films, *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), pursue offbeat, imaginative storylines that in some way highlight various forms of social and personal alienation. However far-fetched his narratives, Anderson generally connects his movies, and his characters, to a concrete, recognizable universe.

Anderson's new work, *Moonrise Kingdom*, seems a polite but adamant statement that the director will not shift gears, despite the present unfolding social disaster. Perhaps, in a roundabout manner, the movie can be read as its own distinct response to the crisis.

Set in 1965, when presumably times were simpler and more innocent, the drama in *Moonrise Kingdom* unfolds on a make-believe island, New Penzance, somewhere off the coast of New England. Continuously anticipating a tempest, the film's narrator (Bob Balaban) is dressed in bad-weather gear. (The references to Shakespeare and Gilbert and Sullivan are clear enough.)

The movie's protagonists are two 12-year-olds, Suzy Bishop (Kara Hayward) and Sam Shakusky (Jared Gilman). The former lives with her parents Walt and Laura (Bill Murray and Frances McDormand) on the tip of the island, while Sam, an orphan, is in the process of being rejected by another foster home. Both young people are oddballs; both, above all, are sensitive. Having found each other a year ago, they are now rendezvousing to escape to a remote part of the island, where, as soulmates, they can live in peace and compatibility.

Sam's survival skills have been honed by the local scout troop, whose knee-socked leader (Edward Norton) is a taller, older version of his charges. During their wilderness trek, Sam provides the practical know-how and equipment, while Suzy supplies the culture and glamour. With eyes heavily made up like a 1960s model and often focused in a disconcerting stare, she totes her library books in a hard suitcase and her cat in a soft basket. She and her siblings have been reared on Benjamin Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1946)—a piece that shows off the capacities of the various portions of an orchestra.

The crisis provoked by Sam and Suzy's disappearance tears the veil away from the barren lives of the community's adults: the Bishops' unhappy marriage, the loneliness of the police chief (Bruce Willis) and the arrested development of the scoutmaster. Tilda Swinton as "Social Services" (the character's name in the cast list), capped and caped in royal blue, is the advocate of electro-shock therapy for young people who do not conform.

Moonrise Kingdom has the look of an eccentric Norman Rockwell painting. It comes across as nostalgic for a by-gone era. Its images are strongly color-infused and sharply delineated. Every shot is elaborately self-conscious. The film opens with a pan of the Bishop residence, laid out like an open-ended dollhouse. Suzy bucks the family's dull routine, observing the world through binoculars in the hope of unleashing "master powers." She is at odds with her siblings and misunderstood by her lawyer parents who impersonally address each other as "Counselor" and sleep in twin beds. Anderson is observant, but the idiosyncratic pleasures pass too fleetingly.

In general, the filmmaker here underuses his cast of talented adult actors, particularly Murray—an Anderson

regular. Neither he nor McDormand has much to do. Norton as Scout Master Ward tries to bring some life to his sophomoric character and Willis's performance is gracefully understated. Swinton has fun with her militaristic caricature.

Newcomers Gilman and Hayward are well directed and engaging. The moments of their mutual exploration are some of the film's best. In the movie's final chapters, however, the pursuit of the duo descends into slapstick and pointless mayhem. Jason Schwartzman as Cousin Ben and Harvey Keitel as Commander Pierce are sacrificed as performers in the process, the audience left wondering about their presence.

Curiously, Anderson seems unconcerned with dramatizing or filling out the lives of his adult characters. Does one of the film's overarching themes, that adulthood represents the onset of mental rigor mortis—and that, as in the case of Swinton's "Social Services," the consequences can be dire—place such an exploration outside the director's field of interest? Since adults, for better or worse, continue to account for a good deal of the content of life-activity on the planet, this seems a pretty restrictive and, dare one say it, childish artistic decision.

Despite everything, a sense of impending doom intrudes in *Moonrise Kingdom*. The narrator's presence and comments are a recurring reminder that something is brewing. And then there is the town's staging of Britten's 1957 opera, *Noye's Fludde* (*Noah's Flood*), a piece that includes the great deluge and, for most of life on earth, the end of the world. These various hints at something bigger and more troubling notwithstanding, the overall results are limited.

It's not so much that *Moonrise Kingdom* is a complacent work, but it obstinately, if gingerly, refuses to hold up a mirror in any direct or significant fashion to our present-day reality. Making a virtue, almost a program, out of such a refusal almost always produces a less interesting outcome.

Could the results be chalked up to Anderson's ultra-sensitivity, his inability or unwillingness, let's say, to live in the present moment? Is it that he finds contemporary life too painful?

It must be said that one's vision of Anderson as a naïf is damaged a little on learning that he has recently employed his gifts on some less-than-innocent projects. In 2007, Anderson oversaw a series of commercials for

AT&T, one of which was scotched when several Lebanese-American groups took offense. The ad portrayed photojournalists being shot at on a Beirut rooftop as the city was being bombed. He has also directed commercials for American Express and the Japanese cell phone company SoftBank.

There are intriguing things Anderson could most likely accomplish if he combined his feeling for human complexity and frailty with a broader view of the world.



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