

Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* and *The Way Way Back*

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Blue Jasmine, written and directed by Woody Allen; *The Way Way Back*, written and directed by Nat Faxon and Jim Rash

Woody Allen has made more than 40 films in the past 44 years. Having carved out a niche in the American film industry, he has outlasted or outlived many of his colleagues and rivals (Paul Mazursky, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Hal Ashby, perhaps Mike Nichols—Barry Levinson is an exception). His unrelenting output still attracts a certain audience, consisting either of those who optimistically refuse to give up on him despite his many years of inferior work or those who respond positively to something in his complacent, quasi-intellectual sensibility.

Sadly, in our view, Allen exhausted himself artistically some 20 years ago, an outcome bound up with the evolution to the right—and the substantial enrichment—of sections of New York City's erstwhile liberal upper-middle class. His annual productions roll into (and out of) movie theaters without making much of an impact these days, despite the generally fulsome praise from the critics.

Genuine art is incompatible with half-measures (or half-thoughts or half-feelings) and Allen's movies lack a life-and-death commitment, whatever their particular genre. The director seems now to go through the motions, offering up works that are terribly flat, and generally dull. Since the mid-1990s, it has been hard to distinguish one of his films from another; distinct plots, locations and performers notwithstanding, as all have been stubbornly devoid of urgency, concreteness and opposition. In criticizing Allen's assembly-line productions, one has to squeeze one's brain to find new words and fresh thoughts to shed light on the recurring problems.

Nonetheless, with each new film, one hopes that the veteran filmmaker might register something objective and truthful about the world, as he did in the past. One hopes each time that he has finally overcome his tendency to create veiled (or not so veiled), narrow and self-justifying autobiography.

Unfortunately, his latest product, *Blue Jasmine*, does not

break the mold. Cate Blanchett plays Jasmine, née Jeanette, once a wealthy New York socialite who is now penniless and heading to San Francisco to live with her working class sister Ginger (Sally Hawkins), a divorced grocery store clerk with two kids.

Plying herself with alcohol and pills only makes Jasmine's grip on reality more tenuous. Numerous flashbacks reveal that her once charmed life included marriage to investment mogul Hal (Alec Baldwin). But underneath Hal's charm lay a philandering and ruthless operator. In fact, he loses/steals the lottery winnings of Ginger and her then-husband, Augie (Andrew Dice Clay). In a fit of anger over his dalliances, Jasmine calls the FBI, leading to Hal's eventual suicide in prison.

When Jasmine moves in with Ginger, she settles into the uneasy existence of a woman without means. A "menial" job as a dental receptionist comes to an abrupt end when her lecherous boss, Dr. Flicker (Michael Stuhlbarg—"Have you ever gotten high on nitrous oxide?"), tries to grope her. Always judgmental, Jasmine disapproves of Ginger's mechanic boyfriend, Chili (Bobby Cannavale), whom she refers to as a "grease monkey."

An unexpected opportunity turns up when Jasmine meets Dwight (Peter Sarsgaard), a diplomat with a lavish lifestyle. But the brass ring eludes her, further damaging her fragile psyche.

Blue Jasmine is essentially a careless, mean-spirited piece. As a whole, the plot is stunted and no character fully developed, but the working class characters are particularly crudely drawn, with Augie and Chili barely making the transition from ape to man. Hawkins' Ginger is a bit more refined, but nonetheless a sweet but witless creature. Her two overweight sons, however, are noisy and obnoxious, rounding out Allen's caricatured vision of the working population.

Blanchett, who is simultaneously fascinating and annoying, exerts herself to ignite the movie's few sparks. Baldwin as Hal sleepwalks through the proceedings. (The actor is livelier in his credit card commercials.) Baldwin's

tepid performance is not unique. The talented Sarsgaard is also a listless presence in the movie.

At bottom, *Blue Jasmine* is not concerned, despite certain claims by commentators, with class society or economic deprivation, but with the problems of a protagonist who has been victimized by all and sundry. (Is this perhaps how Allen sees himself?) Jasmine has been left destitute by her husband (today's Wall Street criminals are customarily above the law, incidentally, and not prone to do themselves in), dumped by a wealthy paramour and neglected by her sister. No compelling reasons are given why we should care or be moved greatly.

Allen prides himself on his lack of engagement with the world, presumably in favor of "more important" questions of psychology and an "eternal" art. In a 2005 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Allen, asked why there was not a hint about what happened September 11, 2001 in his recent films, replied: "[I]t's because I don't find political subjects or topical world events profound enough to get interested in them myself as an artist. As a filmmaker, I'm not interested in 9/11. Because, if you look at the big picture, the long view of things, it's too small, history overwhelms it.

"The history of the world is like: he kills me, I kill him. Only with different cosmetics and different castings: so in 2001 some fanatics killed some Americans, and now some Americans are killing some Iraqis. And in my childhood, some Nazis killed Jews. And now, some Jewish people and some Palestinians are killing each other. Political questions, if you go back thousands of years, are ephemeral, not important. History is the same thing over and over again."

It's hard to respond to such a superficial, empty-headed statement. No important film work has ever been done on this basis.

The Way Way Back

The Way Way Back, the new feature by Nat Faxon and Jim Rash, who won the Oscar for co-writing *The Descendants*' screenplay, presents familiar themes in a film that is often pleasant and charming.

The movie opens with sullen, 14-year-old Duncan (Liam James) seemingly banished to the rear of a station wagon ("the way, way back") en route to the rustic Massachusetts beach house owned by Trent (Steve Carell), the boyfriend of Duncan's mother Pam (Toni Collette).

"Hey buddy," taunts Trent, "on a scale of one to 10, where would you put yourself?" When Duncan answers "a six," the potential stepfather's nasty comeback is that the boy is

really "a three."

Feeling suffocated and angry with his mother for putting up with Trent's bullying ways, as well as his trysts with neighbor Joan (Amanda Peet), Duncan bicycles to Water Wizz, an antiquated water park run by Owen (Sam Rockwell). Something of an irreverent outcast, Owen takes Duncan under his wing, boosting the boy's confidence and self-esteem, which eventually also changes the dynamic between Trent and Pam.

The Way Way Back touches on certain important matters, while turning a blind eye to much, much bigger ones. It is relatively easy on itself and on the world. The filmmakers apparently planned to set their movie in the 1980s, but discarded the idea for reasons of cost and settled for an enigmatic "timelessness."

The film's vague look and feel of another, more innocent decade is appealing, but it is all too compatible with a formulaic and predictable storyline: A perceptive youth [Duncan, in this case] is neglected by insensitive, myopic adults [Trent, his mother, etc.] consumed by their own petty dramas. The adolescent's savior appears in the form of a savvy, unconventional guide to real life [Owen]. Despite his appearance as an underachiever, the latter opens the curtains to reveal things in their messiness and moral shades of gray. The boy's voyage of self-discovery is also aided by a raucous, hard-drinking neighbor [Allison Janney's Betty], who always cuts to the chase.

Rockwell is engaging as the film's needed comic backbone, with Janney as the sprinkle of spice. Collette is left to flounder in search of a dramatic core, while Carell is fairly one-dimensional as the self-obsessed aggressor. Directors Faxon and Rash are entertaining as eccentric water park employees. Unfortunately, Maya Rudolph as Owen's cohort is largely wasted in the film.

The Way Way Back is enjoyable, but we have seen this before ... a few times.



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