

The Grand Budapest Hotel from Wes Anderson

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Directed by Wes Anderson; screenplay by Anderson; story by Anderson and Hugo Guinness

Wes Anderson's newest film, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, is a stylish, fantastical film, sometimes comic and sometimes tragic in its re-imagining of the period between the two world wars and the emergence of fascistic forces in Europe. The movie, the filmmaker's eighth feature, is a departure for Anderson in its attempt to tackle big historical questions.

The filmmaker's ambition is a worthy one. However, Anderson's tight orchestration of sound, images and offbeat characters in the new film, while sensuously arresting, tends to work as a substitute for a true engagement with the monumental events. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is a visually appealing, intriguing film that is not up to the commendable task it has set up for itself. As a whole, it does not succeed in dramatizing the European situation of the time, including the rise of fascism, which one character describes as "the barbaric slaughterhouse once known as humanity."

Anderson has an unusual sensibility and approach to life and art. It is quirky, inventive and absurd, yet humane. He celebrates personal independence, sometimes for its own sake, and has an affinity for outsiders, misfits and "free spirits." His best films, such as *Rushmore* (1988), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), explore themes that highlight various forms of social and personal alienation.

Unfortunately, in his last two films, *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), Anderson's trademark preciousness and archness wore thin. Both movies were flat without much of interest going on. With certain qualifications, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is his best picture to date.

The new movie opens in 1985, with an aging author (Tom Wilkinson) telling the story of his 1968 encounter (Jude Law plays his younger self) with the "deeply, truly lonely" Zero Moustafa (F. Murray Abraham), proprietor of a once luxurious, but now empty and run-down hotel in the (fictional) Republic of Zubrowka, somewhere in the remotest corner of what was once the Austria-Hungarian Empire. Moustafa proceeds to recount how he rose from lowly lobby boy to owner of the hotel....

It is 1932, and the Grand Budapest Hotel is one of Europe's

most illustrious and elegant destinations for the wealthy. Its concierge is the flamboyant, solicitous Gustave H. (Ralph Fiennes), who services *all* of the needs of the hotel's patrons. Gustave manages to both juggle his demanding (and aging) paramours and train the hotel staff with a certain amount of sincere, adroit con artistry. His most devoted client is the 84-year-old dowager countess, Madame Céline Villeneuve Desgoffe und Taxis, otherwise known as Madame D. (the hilariously unrecognizable Tilda Swinton).

The sudden death of Madame D. sets off the film's main drama. That centrally involves Gustave H. and his protégé, the immigrant lobby boy, a young Zero Moustafa (Tony Revolori), as they deal with both the efforts of Madame D.'s family to pin a crime on Gustave and rob him of what the old lady has left him in her will, on the one hand, and growing repression and the threat of war, on the other.

Gustave and Zero end up being halfheartedly followed by the captain of the Lutz Military Police, Albert Henckels (Edward Norton), and wholeheartedly pursued by more sinister forces, in the person of Jopling (Willem Dafoe), a fascist thug. Gustave also comes up against the "death squad to whom we have never been formally introduced." When the latter, at the border, initially manhandle Zero, Gustave protests: "You can't arrest him simply because he's a bloody immigrant."

Twisting and turning, the plot features various extravagant chase scenes pertaining to Madame D.'s estate, a famous painting, and her heirs—a hideous trio of daughters and a greedy, conniving son Dmitri (Adrien Brody), whose hit man is the fanged, brass-knuckled Jopling. A more reasonable (and vulnerable) figure in the crowd is Madame D.'s lawyer, Deputy Vilmos Kovacs (Jeff Goldblum), and the millionairess's trusted butler, Serge X (French actor Mathieu Amalric), who both operate against the conspirators.

Eventually, Gustave H. ends up at Check-Point 19 Criminal Camp, a medieval-era prison guarded by a moat full of crocodiles. Adorned with barbed wire, it has the look of a concentration camp.

Zero's young love and accomplice against the police is Agatha (Saoirse Ronan), a hauntingly alluring pastry chef apprentice.

Regulars in Anderson films Bill Murray and Bob Balaban

show up as members of The Society of the Crossed Keys—an association of concierges at the world’s great hotels. Other stalwarts (Owen Wilson, Jason Schwartzman) put in brief appearances.

Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is concerned with, or touches upon, a crucial period of history and large questions: war, repression, the treatment of refugees, the irrationality of borders. This may help account for the fact that the writer-director better marshals his stylistic elements in the service of the drama and its concerns here than has been usual for him. The various lush elements—décor, design and music—seem more cohesive. (The outstanding, gypsy music-inspired score by Alexandre Desplat combines Central European instruments and a 50-member balalaika orchestra flown in from Moscow.)

Fiennes is the perfect acting vehicle. Irrepressibly energetic and humane in the face of adversity, he is the always gracious and well-mannered champion of a young refugee, whose family and village have been destroyed, and a solitary girl, marred by a large birthmark on her face. Ronan as Agatha adds a quiet depth of emotion and feeling to the non-stop goings-on. There is humanity here and sympathy for those who are suffering.

Interestingly, Anderson credits the writings of Stefan Zweig—Austrian novelist, playwright, journalist, biographer, translator and essayist (1881-1942)—as the inspiration for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Zweig was a remarkable figure in many ways. Growing up in the extraordinary turn-of-the-century atmosphere of Vienna, he epitomized the cosmopolitanism of that city’s artistic layers and Jewish intelligentsia in particular. In the 1920s and 1930s, Zweig was one of the most popular writers in the world. He later became a refugee from the Nazis and ended his life by suicide in Brazil, out of despair at the war and the apparent fate of European culture. He wrote in a suicide note, “I thus prefer to end my life at the right time, upright, as a man for whom cultural work has always been his purest happiness and personal freedom—the most precious of possessions on this earth.”

In his memorial essay on the tenth anniversary of Zweig’s death, German writer Thomas Mann wrote: “Never was world fame worn with deeper modesty, finer shyness, more unfeigned humility.... Propagation of the good was his deep concern, and he probably devoted half of his life to translating, disseminating, serving, and helping.”

Anderson’s interest in the Austrian writer is noteworthy, but the filmmaker apparently has a very one-sided view of Zweig, to say the least, simply as a smooth-talking man of the world. But Zweig took a great interest in the historical and social problems of the day. He has remarkable descriptions in his autobiography, *The World of Yesterday* (1942), of significant events and personalities, including a trip to the Soviet Union in 1928.

In one chilling sequence, Zweig describes the breaking up—with great precision—of a meeting of Social Democrats by a

group of Nazis, who arrive and leave by truck. The brutality inflicted on the workers was “not an individual skill, rather every one of these manipulations must have been practiced in advance dozens and perhaps hundreds of times in barracks and on drill grounds: from the start—it was plain at a glance—these troops had been trained to attack, force, and terror.”

The movie’s production notes contain an essay, entitled “The Cosmopolitan Apocalypse of Stefan Zweig,” by George Prochnik, which may help explain—more than the film itself—why Anderson is attracted to Zweig. It argues: “Today, when governmental surveillance and the official documentation of every aspect of existence are once again multiplying so aggressively that many people feel their core individuality to be threatened, Stefan Zweig’s impassioned pursuit of personal freedom seems more relevant than ever. His anguished existence of exile has lessons for us all about the values of civilization that we should be fighting to save in our own time.”

In a National Public Radio interview, Anderson did acknowledge that the “reason I want to engage with it [World War II] is because this series of events in Europe are somehow still right in the middle of our lives.”

But, in the end, too little of Zweig’s sharpness and urgency about history and events makes its way into *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. It’s not an individual failing, but the product of a remoteness and distance that stems from a lack of historical knowledge, as well as a lack of practice and expertise at working on such subject matter. (A *considerably* greater cinematic-intellectual appreciation of Zweig is to be found in the work of Max Ophüls, the great German-born director, who made a film based on the Austrian author’s 1922 novella, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, in 1948.)

The movie is something of a pastiche, a picture-postcard view of events, done with too much flippancy, still with too much emphasis on the picturesque—albeit fast-paced (except for a few dead zones) and amusing. It is a little too like one of the confections that figure so prominently in the film.



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