

Sofia Coppola's *On the Rocks*: Fathers and daughters

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Written and directed by Sofia Coppola

In *On the Rocks* (2020), the latest feature film by Sofia Coppola, a married woman is encouraged by her father to believe her husband is conducting a love affair.

Laura (Rashida Jones), a novelist, lives in New York with her husband, Dean (Marlon Wayans), an “entrepreneur” at a successful “tech start-up,” and their two daughters. Laura’s father, Felix Keane (Bill Murray), is a wealthy art dealer and a notorious philanderer.

Partly as the result of Laura’s frustration and even boredom with her life (the demands of children, a temporary inability to write, an often absent mate), partly because of certain unexplained occurrences, she begins to suspect Dean is carrying on with a work associate, Fiona (Jessica Henwick).

Felix, who takes for granted that every husband is an adulterer like himself, sets out to establish Dean’s “guilt.” He encourages Laura to check her husband’s cellphone for incriminating messages. Subsequently, without his daughter’s permission, Felix has a detective spy on his son-in-law. He later persuades Laura to join him in keeping tabs on Dean at a work dinner. When the latter leaves in a taxi with Fiona, father and daughter follow them in Felix’s sports car. An encounter with the police puts a halt to that misadventure.

In the end, Felix and Laura travel to Mexico to catch Dean in the act, an expedition that turns into a humiliating fiasco.

There is not much here.

In *On the Rocks*, Murray provides some amusement, as is his wont, his vocation. Without that, there would be even less here.

Jones (the daughter of famed musician-composer

Quincy Jones) and Wayans conscientiously imitate an urbane, affluent couple, but without much conviction. We do not discover very much about these people except that they exist. What does their relationship and situation point toward beyond itself?

It was painful in the 1980s to sit through films directed by Woody Allen, set in what was already a “fantasized Manhattan,” in which one had the impression that the director was “obliged to keep his camera tilted up..., above street level, to avoid the homeless on the streets and the growing social decay.” That was 35 years ago or so. An immense deterioration in the conditions of wide layers of the city’s population has taken place, alongside the accumulation of almost unimaginable fortunes by a relative handful.

How deplorable to encounter a new film devoted to the elegant, sophisticated New York of the 21 Club (now closed, due to the pandemic), the Plaza (referred to fondly by Felix) and Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle Hotel. An intrepid investigator at *Slate* turned up the fact that Laura and Dean live in lower Manhattan’s SoHo neighborhood at “81 Wooster Street, where a second-story pad would be a steal at \$6.1 million.” Felix’s vintage sports car glides along glistening pavement at night in a city without serious traffic, poverty or social tension.

What could Sofia Coppola possibly be thinking? Why would she make this intensely complacent film?

Coppola (born 1972) has directed numerous feature films, shorts and music videos over the past 25 years. Unfortunately, none of them has made a strong, favorable impression. The WSWS has negatively commented on *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and *The Beguiled* (2017).

The different films have different problems, but they

have this much in common: a failure to examine contemporary life (or historical events, in the case of *The Beguiled* and *Marie Antoinette*) with genuine concreteness, urgency or a socially critical eye. Coppola's works lie largely on the surface, reflecting the varying states of mind (listlessness, detachment, vague dissatisfaction, superciliousness) of the milieu to which she belongs. She has not yet been able to get out of herself and her world and treat either objectively.

Sofia Coppola is the daughter of filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola. He is responsible for *The Godfather* (1972), *The Conversation* (1974) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), although not much since those films.

Influenced by the radical mood of the times and momentous events such as the Vietnam War, Francis Ford Coppola forcefully captured in a number of works the ruthless, criminal, conspiratorial character of American big business, government and military operations. There has not been a hint of that in Sofia Coppola's efforts to date.

One of the arguments of *On the Rocks* is that the daughter who fails to separate herself unmistakably and decisively from a charismatic, imposing parent does so at her peril. In general, this may well be useful advice. However, the weak experience of the film itself suggests that it may be unfortunate, in this case, that Sofia Coppola hasn't followed a little more closely in her father's footsteps.



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