

Asteroid City: Important art doesn't come to the artist "in sleep"

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Asteroid City is the latest effort from Wes Anderson, one of the more lively and intriguing US writer-directors of the last few decades, notable for films such as *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *Isle of Dogs*.

Anderson's new film has several connected portions, one fitting into the other. In the 1950s, a southern playwright, Conrad Earp (Edward Norton), has written a play about a small desert town and the collection of people who gather there. A television host (Bryan Cranston) breathlessly promises to take us "backstage to witness firsthand the creation, start to finish, of a new play mounted on the American stage." Considerably later, we meet the play's director, Schubert Green (Adrien Brody), and an earnest acting teacher, Saltzburg Keitel (Willem Dafoe).

The bulk of the drama, supposedly Earp's play, takes place in the fictional southwestern US town of Asteroid City, during the period of nuclear testing. Grief-stricken widower and photojournalist Augie Steenbeck (Jason Schwartzman) has brought his "brainiac" son Woodrow (Jake Ryan) and three young daughters (triplets) to the hamlet for a Junior Stargazer convention and award ceremony. Also present is disconsolate movie star Midge Campbell (Scarlett Johansson), the mother of another Junior Stargazer, Dinah (Grace Edwards), also a "genius."

When his car breaks down in the town, Augie summons his successful, conventional suburbanite father-in-law, Stanley Zak (Tom Hanks), to come and help the family out.

The melancholic Augie and Midge fall in with one another. She tells him, deadpan: "I prefer to play abused, tragic alcoholics, and one day, I'll probably be discovered lifeless in an overflowing bathtub with an empty bottle of sleeping pills spilled all over the floor, but the sad thing is I'm actually a very gifted comedienne." Marilyn Monroe comes to mind. Further on, she asserts that the pair are "two catastrophically wounded people who don't express the depths of their pain because we don't want to." The scenes are convincing and probably *Asteroid City*'s most affecting.

However, there is a good deal of sadness and anxiety to go around. Hosting a ceremony celebrating Asteroid Day, General

Gibson (Jeffrey Wright) informs his listeners, "If you wanted to live a nice, quiet, peaceful life, you picked the wrong time to get born." Nuclear tests continue to go off in the distance.

Woodrow is somewhat forlorn and subdued too, in part because of his mother's recent death. He develops a relationship with Midge's daughter, Dinah. Meanwhile, an "alien" (Jeff Goldblum)—very much a 1950s' movie alien!—descends from a spaceship and takes off with the town's small, signature asteroid.

After the alien appears, a naïve, young teacher (Maya Hawke) tells her class: "I want to emphasize that you're safe. We all are, here on Earth. Your parents have been notified of at least something. America remains at peace." The reassurance implies the opposite is the case.

The alien's presence sets the US government into motion, which proceeds to implement "National Security Emergency Scrimmage Plan X," a measure that obliges the military to "secure the site, cease the dissemination of information, collect and transport the totality of evidence to a hermetically enclosed, deep-underground secret storage facility and publicly deny all aspects of the event, including its existence, for a period of no less than 100 years."

In effect, the town is quarantined, presumably a reference to the recent pandemic crisis and phenomenon of mass death, an inference strengthened by the recent loss of Augie's wife, who "got too sick. And, to put it bluntly, after all the surgeries, therapies and interventions, after two years of struggling and suffering, she succumbed to her illnesses."

There are also various amusing or eccentric goings-on, the teacher and her elementary school class, an unlikely cowboy band, a local store-owner (Steve Carell) selling tiny portions of land out of a vending machine and more.

What is Anderson up to?

His new film revels in its self-consciousness, mannerisms, artifice, even at times preciousness. It has charming and original moments too.

What can one conclude, based on a viewing of Anderson's various films, that he stands for, generally speaking, as an artist?

He opposes conformism, authoritarianism and cruelty, he mocks standardized, regular patterns of behavior. The director identifies in particular with the enthusiasm, curiosity and rebelliousness of youth. What does he think of contemporary society? Anderson for the most part avoids taking on that question directly. He seems to suggest that one should live in a distinctive, individualist manner, keeping one's distance from the social conflicts, the danger of war, navigating "literarily," "gracefully," but with genuine feeling, around the large problems and obstacles. It is a quasi-utopian vision, a universe in the midst of our present reality where art and emotional intimacy hold sway, even if tenuously.

Where does that leave us here?

Two themes or moods seem to predominate in *Asteroid City*: first, despite the entertaining-humorous elements, a general melancholy, a restrained, hushed quality; second, the sense that the writer-director is to a considerable extent overwhelmed by events.

The characters struggle to make themselves understood or their presence felt, in the face of obstacles thrown up by American illusions, individualism, crassness, militarism. Woodrow's first inclination is to project a US flag on the moon as part of the effort to communicate with extraterrestrial life. (Someone asks rhetorically, "Is he trying to provoke World War Three or something?")

Woodrow then tells an actual adult scientist, Dr. Hickenlooper (Tilda Swinton), pointedly that "I put the American flag just to be patriotic. Now we need to really mean something," and that "This is our chance to be actually worthwhile in our lifetimes."

She responds, "It's all worthwhile in your lifetime ... Your curiosity is your most important asset. Trust it. ... Trust your curiosity." Subsequently, Woodrow instead projects the initials of he and his new girl-friend (W.S. + D.C.). That seems friendlier and less threatening. Augie too evolves from hard-bitten "war photographer," to genuine sadness (about his wife's death) and genuine love in the face of Midge's obvious warmth and other qualities.

Creativity, inquisitiveness, philosophical tolerance or resignation ("The time is never right. The time is always wrong") seem to be the characters' most valuable or valued qualities. This is decent, humane, but a little tepid under the present circumstances.

In one of the latter scenes, Augie (or rather the actor playing him in the play within the film), asks the theater director (Brody) whether he is playing the character properly on stage every night. This exchange occurs:

-You're doing him just right. In fact, in my opinion, you didn't just become Augie. He became you.

-I feel lost.

-Good.

-He's such a wounded guy. I feel like my heart is getting broken—my own, personal heart—every night.

-Good.

-Do I just keep doing it?

-Yes.

-Without knowing anything?

-Yes.

-Isn't there supposed to be some kind of an answer out there in the cosmic wilderness? ... Well, that's my question. I still don't understand the play.

-Doesn't matter. Just keep telling the story.

Simply to keep creating (and loving) in the face of catastrophe, personal and social, and the apparent meaninglessness of existence. And to rely on the instincts, the unconscious. An acting class keeps repeating, "You can't wake up if you don't fall asleep," in what seems to be an unhappy reformulation of the surrealist position, that dream life is more revealing and profound as the path to truth.

The German philosopher Hegel, on the other hand, argued that to grasp the reality of the "actual world" in the form of concrete imagery, the artist had to call on "(i) the watchful circumspection of the intellect, and (ii) the depth of the heart and its animating feelings," that it was an absurdity to suppose that immortal works "came to the poet in sleep" and "silly to believe that the genuine artist does not know what he is doing."

The artist, Hegel continued, "must not only have looked around at much in the world and made himself acquainted with its outer and inner manifestations, but he must have drawn much, and much that is great, into his own soul; his heart must have been deeply gripped and moved thereby; he must have done and lived through much before he can develop the true depths of life into concrete manifestations."

This is difficult at this point for contemporary artists. They have to go beyond their limited, passive and non-committal approaches to life and society. Anderson is one of the more interesting ones, but the last number of decades have taken their toll on him too.



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