

# Wes Anderson's *The Phoenician Scheme*: For today's "ruthless capitalist ... there is no shame, everything happens with cameras and microphones on in front of everyone"

Joanne Laurier  
16 July 2025

Writer-director Wes Anderson's most recent film is *The Phoenician Scheme*, with Benicio del Toro, Benedict Cumberbatch, Scarlett Johansson and others. The film is a sprawling satire about a shameless, domineering businessman and his various relationships, economic and personal. Anderson's movie takes its place among the growing number of works devoted to America's lawless ruling elite. Appropriately so!

The director was forthright in an interview with *El Mundo America*, acknowledging that since

the film's plot deals with a ruthless capitalist, the political dimension is evident and very important. What is happening now, what has changed from the past, is that big businessmen now act in front of everyone. The role of big capitalists has always been the same since capitalism exists. But before, they maneuvered behind the scenes, and you would only find out about their power, if you ever did, 25 years later because of some historical study or investigation. Now there is no shame, everything happens with cameras and microphones on in front of everyone.

Of course, *The Phoenician Scheme* is carried off with Anderson's characteristic "touch," i.e., eccentric, roundabout, imaginative, quasi-literary, a little claustrophobic, oblique and even at times confusing. The American filmmaker (born 1969 in Houston) offers his account of the fate of a "great capitalist" in the form of a dark comedy about a sociopathic billionaire who keeps surviving airplane crashes and other assassination attempts, stores his ambitious plans in numbered shoeboxes and hands

over a business empire to his youthful daughter, a novice preparing to take her final vows! There are even scenes set in heaven!

The result is surprising, oddly appealing and generally humane.

Anderson's films include *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Isle of Dogs*, *The French Dispatch* and *Asteroid City*, as well as the short film compilation *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Three More*.

Anatole "Zsa-Zsa" Korda (del Toro), a callous, domineering industrialist, is one of the richest men in Europe. His wide-ranging and seriously questionable business practices have earned him enemies not just among rival enterprises, but also governments of every ideology across the globe—and made him a recurring target of hired killers and other conspirators (for example, he has survived six planes falling out of the sky). Dogged for years by accusations of profiteering, tax evasion, price-fixing and bribery, Korda specializes in the negotiation of clandestine trade agreements.

("A certain type of businessman who can always pivot," says Anderson, "and has very little obligation to honor the truth.")

As the film opens, Zsa-Zsa is once more in mid-flight. A fuselage panel blows off, taking his secretary with it. Zsa-Zsa rushes to the cockpit, quickly dispenses with the terrified, angry pilot ("You're fired," Korda says, flipping a switch and ejecting the pilot along with his seat), and informs air traffic control he will land in a cornfield. He travels with hand grenades, and often gives them as gifts, because they are supposedly cheaper than bullets.

Korda is in the final stages of a decades-long, career-defining project—the Korda Land and Sea Phoenician

Infrastructure Scheme—the expansive development of a potentially rich, long-dormant region. The risk to his personal fortune, however, has also become incalculable. And the threats to his life are ongoing. He chooses this moment to appoint and prepare a successor: his twenty-year-old estranged daughter Liesl (Mia Threapleton, daughter of Kate Winslet), currently a nun in training.

“My father has appointed me provisional successor and prospective beneficiary of his vast fortune, gained entirely, as you know, through unholy mischief,” she explains.

With personal tutor Bjorn (Michael Cera) in tow (professor, US government spy and specialist in bugs—of the organic kind), Zsa-Zsa and Liesl sweep across Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia meeting their assorted partners on a mission to close The Gap (a rapidly expanding financial shortfall) that Zsa-Zsa quantifies as: “Everything we got—plus a little bit more.”

Before the scheme can be set in motion (“In short, we’re gonna need slave labor, but that’s available to us”), Zsa-Zsa discovers that someone has been manipulating the price of bashable rivets, sending up the cost of construction around the region, and widening the pre-existing fiscal gulf: an act of apparent sabotage that threatens more than Korda’s grand vision. Now, they’ll need to rendezvous with every titan with the hope of convincing each of them to help cover more of “the gap.” (“If something gets in your way, flatten it.”)

Meanwhile, in a high-level government office somewhere, unidentified bureaucrats from around the world discuss Zsa-Zsa, outlining his disruptive business practices. “He swindles our banks,” asserts Excalibur (Rupert Friend), an American in charge of a secret mission to monitor and disrupt Zsa-Zsa’s enterprise.

“He dodges our tariffs,” they claim. “He ties up our courtrooms in tactical lawsuits. He provokes war (as well as peace) in direct conflict with our shared diplomatic agenda.” Their objective: “disrupting, obstructing, impeding, crippling Korda’s enterprise in any manner possible...”

Zsa-Zsa has signed investment deals with various relatives and associates, including Marty (Jeffrey Wright), Cousin Hilda (Scarlett Johansson), Marseille Bob (Mathieu Amalric) and Zsa-Zsa’s own brother, Uncle Nubar, who may incidentally have murdered Zsa-Zsa’s wife and is terrifyingly played by Benedict Cumberbatch in Rasputin-like guise. (“For the next 150 years, I’d rather sell guns, bombs and ammunition. It’s our family business.”)

Zsa-Zsa has recurring visions of judgment day before God, played by Bill Murray. Other characters include Leland (Hanks), an American businessman and partner with his brother Reagan (Bryan Cranston) in the Sacramento Consortium (now engaged in the construction of the Transmountain Locomotive Tunnel). Leland is serious, sedate, but always ready for a game of hoops. Reagan himself is an expert negotiator and occasional trash-talker.

We also meet Sergio (Richard Ayoade), commander of the Jungle Unit of the Intercontinental Radical Freedom Militia Corps, devoted to orphans and widows; the blind, the sick and the wounded; farmers; teachers; and the construction of a hygienic wastewater disposal system.

The performances are top-notch. For many actors, Anderson is a popular and sought-after director. Stars like del Toro, Cumberbatch, Johansson, Hanks, Cranston, Cera and Murray clearly appear in the films as a labor of love.

Del Toro is a muted oligarch who nonetheless rattles on about slave labor as if it were nothing special. Also outstanding is Threapleton as the stoically zealous, pipe-smoking, hard-drinking Catholic woman of the cloth, sporting a “secular” jewel-studded rosary. The Scandinavian-accented Cera is hilarious as the love-struck secret agent and entomologist. All in all, the actors respond to and convey the Anderson touch masterfully.

*The Phoenician Scheme* is generally comical, the characters zipping through invented lands and odd-ball scenarios. But it is also somewhat subdued, given the various elements of the narrative: business and government treachery, guerrilla warfare, espionage, assassination, murder, exploitation, the hoarding of billions of dollars. Anderson is seeking to orient himself and gain his bearings in very difficult times. Events, and not just the Trump-Musk phenomenon, are leaving their mark on the filmmakers—endless wars, endless lies, cutthroat dealings, cruel disdain for the population and criminality in the extreme!

Has Anderson got the present situation right? No, not exactly. There are tangents and red herrings and dead ends here. But the filmmaker is on a healthy path. Without a doubt, gangster capitalists are among the central figures of our times.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**