

FILM REVIEW




by Mark Dollar

Tasting (and Toasting) *Sideways*

Written and directed by Alexander Payne (*Election*, *About Schmidt*), *Sideways* is the rare low-budget indie that has received not only critical applause but big-time Oscar buzz as well. The comedy was nominated for Best Picture this season with more traditional academy darlings like *Ray*, *Million Dollar Baby*, and *The Aviator*. So what makes this little film so special? Well, I was struck by the unusual, lyrical sadness that flows just beneath the surface of what seems like a conventional buddy/road trip flick. It really transcends comedy. Yes, there are moments of outright slapstick and bawdy bedroom farce, but *The Road to Morocco* this is not.

Miles (Paul Giamatti) and Jack (Thomas Haden Church) are best friends, but it's hard to see why. Jack is a superficial, aging lothario — a frat boy turned former soap actor who, now in his 40s, has yet to grow up. As a depressed, divorced, and unlucky slob, Miles strikes a grave balance to Jack's lightness. How did they become so close? We find out that they were freshman dorm roommates at San Diego State, brought together by the luck of the draw; they stay together from a sick symbiosis — Miles needs Jack to draw him out of isolation while Jack needs Miles to bail him out of trouble.

Jack is getting married in a week, and Miles promises to take him up to Santa Barbara County's wine district for seven days of tasting, golf, and debauchery. As the two meander from winery to winery, Miles grows ever more distraught over his divorce (his ex is coming to Jack's wedding) and Jack becomes ever less sure that monogamy is for him. When the two meet Maya and Stephanie (Sandra Oh), their characters open up in new and surprising ways. Jack begins an affair with Stephanie, who has no clue about his fiancée, and Miles slowly warms to Maya, played luminously by Virginia

Madsen. It is the touching relationship between Miles and Maya that is at the heart of this movie, and their analysis of grapes becomes a recurring metaphor for her sweetness, gone unappreciated, and his entire life, dying on the vine.

I realize that *Sideways* doesn't sound terribly humorous, but the best comedies offer a hint (or, in wine-speak, a *soupsçon*) of tragedy affecting the protagonists, making us care about their outlandish misfortunes. Miles is a fellow for whom pretension becomes a crushing burden, not merely a character quirk. On the one hand, Miles plays the oenophile, judging Pinots and Syrahs with a mind-boggling sense of snobbery and entitlement (in one scene, for instance, he goes ballistic at Jack's suggestion that they order a Merlot with dinner). On the other hand, Miles is a drunk, desperate man who damns his palate in one fit of rage by chugging a vat of inferior, regurgitated red. He steals money from his mother to fund the trip, he lies to cover Jack's philandering, and he pathetically tries to impress Maya with his manuscript — a 700-page tome called, predictably, *The Day After Yesterday*. I didn't know whether to laugh or cringe.

By the third act, we long for Miles to risk being unselfish for once in his life. He seems capable of growth Jack could never dream of, and we want him to move on to a new life with Maya, despite all of the ways he sabotages it. Whether he succeeds, you'll just have to see for yourself. *Sideways* is ultimately a mellow, confident work about people who are neither; despite the self-destructive choices the characters often make, you'll find yourself wanting just one more sip of this extraordinary movie. *A!*

About the Reviewer: Mark Dollar, Assistant Professor of English, teaches literature, writing, and film at King College in Bristol, TN.

Arts Array Film Series

The Arts Array Film Series continues with showings at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. at the Abingdon Cinemall. \$6. 276-739-2447.

From Brazilian director Walter Salles, who made *Central Station*, comes ***The Motorcycle Diaries* (Feb. 28 and Mar. 1)**. This is the true story of a medical student from Argentina who traveled across South America on a motorcycle with his friend in 1951-52. What starts as a lark becomes a journey of self-discovery. The film traces the origins of the revolutionary heart that would become El Che, who had a profound impact on the history of several nations. As they see homeless miners, riverboat prostitutes, lepers, and prosperous gentry, the two young men discover an affinity for humanity within themselves, and a determination to change the world.

***Sideways* (Mar. 7-8)** tells the story of a failed novelist and his soon-to-be married friend, a washed-up actor. Directed by one of Hollywood's best young directors, Alexander Payne, this comic masterpiece is a portrait of the male ego in middle-aged disarray as the duo comes to some profound realizations about life. In addition to being nominated for the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture and winning the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture/Comedy, the film won the Best Picture awards from the New York Film Critics Circle, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the Boston Society of Film Critics, the Chicago Film Critics Association, and the Southeastern Film Critics Association.

***Vera Drake* (Mar. 14-15)** is a subtle but harrowing British film that dramatizes the

complexities in the issue of abortion. The title character, Vera Drake, performs abortions for the poor women in her district, a working-class neighborhood of London in 1950. The film is neither pro- nor anti-abortion, but a dramatization of the clash of moral and legal right and wrong. The film was directed by Mike Leigh, whom critic Roger Ebert calls "the most interesting director now at work in England." The lead is played by Imelda Staunton who won several best actress awards for her performance.

In ***Enduring Love* (Mar. 21-22)** a man falls to his death in a hot-air balloon accident, an event that shatters the lives of two witnesses. British director, Roger Mitchell, working from the award-winning novel by Ian McEwan, develops an unnerving sense of dread as both men become unhinged. A meditation on love, faith, and science in the guise of a thriller, the film is thoroughly gripping.

From Africa's greatest director, Ousmane Sembene, comes ***Moolaadé* (Mar. 28-29)**, an enthralling portrayal of a courageous woman who offers protection to four young girls escaping the ancient ceremony of female circumcision. She fends off the disapproval of the village elders by invoking *moolaadé* (protection). As the village is stirred to rebellion, Sembene allows each argument its dignity, presenting the challenge to change and adapt as an embrace rather than an admonition. As critic Lisa Schwarzbaum observes, "This great work of art has the potential to change the world."



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