



Blue Jasmine

Director: Woody Allen

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A review by Justin Chan for *Variety*:

San Francisco has been good to Woody Allen, from his 1969 directing debut with “Take the Money and Run” to his lead turn in 1972’s “Play It Again, Sam,” and a long-overdue return visit provides just the shot of artistic adrenaline he needs in “Blue Jasmine.” It doesn’t hurt that this serious-minded but ruefully funny work is centered around a mesmerizing performance by Cate Blanchett as a neurotic Allen heroine for the ages, a desperate New York socialite who heads West after losing her husband and their ill-gotten fortune. Probing the allure of romantic fulfillment and upward mobility with rigor, emotional generosity and a pleasing sense of dramatic balance, this Sony Classics release won’t do “Midnight in Paris”-sized numbers, but solid critical response should pull in more than just the faithful.

Following the frivolities of “Midnight in Paris” and “To Rome With Love,” Allen makes an invigorating return to American soil with a meaty, fully realized drama that cleverly functions as both an update of “A Streetcar Named Desire” and a satire on One Percent excess. And while “Blue Jasmine” is rather less idyllic than the writer-director’s previous creative high point, “Vicky Cristina Barcelona,” it superficially recalls that 2008 comedy in charting the fortunes of two women, a blonde and a brunette, pursuing their very different goals in life. Yet Blanchett’s performance is so dominant in terms of screentime and emotional impact that the film succeeds as not only a virtuoso ensemble piece, but also an unflinchingly intimate study of the character in the title.



The fact that Jasmine sometimes still uses her birth name, Jeanette, provides an early clue that this is a woman with a talent for self-invention — someone who can’t help but delude herself and others, and who doesn’t mind turning a blind eye to those inconvenient realities that might threaten her life of privilege. That privilege has been yanked away from Jasmine as she arrives in San Francisco, evidently broke and single, and moves in with her sister, Ginger (Sally Hawkins).

That the girls were adopted from different sets of biological parents explains their lack of resemblance, in looks and temperament. While laid-back, free-spirited Ginger works at a supermarket, has two rowdy kids from a previous marriage, and is engaged to a macho, greasy-haired tough named Chili (Bobby Cannavale), Jasmine is clearly made of classier stuff, or so she thinks. Regular flashbacks reveal her life of luxury in the Hamptons with her businessman husband, Hal (Alec Baldwin), who turned out to be as chronically unfaithful to her as he was to his investors. Among the many victims of his Madoff-like schemes were Ginger and her then-husband, Augie (actor-comedian Andrew Dice Clay), who made the mistake of entrusting Hal with \$200,000 in lottery winnings.

The contrast between past and present begins to feel almost unbearably cruel as Jasmine is forced to pull herself up by her bootstraps, not an easy task for someone accustomed to Jimmy Choos. Eventually she begins working as a receptionist for a lecherous dentist (Michael Stuhlbarg) and taking computer classes, the first steps toward a highly improbable career in interior design. Yet far from humbling or inspiring her, hard work seems to make her only more pinched, whiny and abrasive, and as she compulsively mixes

martinis and Xanax, she becomes ever more critical of the easily contented Ginger and her “loser” boyfriend.

While the New York flashbacks occasionally veer toward overstatement, they convey more than mere backstory, providing a psychological entry point as Jasmine becomes more and more unglued with every painful reminder of what she’s lost. Quivering with barely repressed rage, at times muttering to herself as she stares blankly into the void, Jasmine instantly takes her place among the most dynamic female protagonists in the Allen oeuvre, which is no small feat. It’s a brilliantly bipolar piece of acting, bringing an almost Method rawness to the writer’s typically refined dialogue, and what gives Blanchett’s performance such force is how expertly she modulates her character’s mood swings: One minute she’s a pill-popping, bleary-eyed wreck, the next she’s a vision of radiant, sylphlike elegance (especially in an array of stunning outfits designed by Suzy Benzinger), cozying up to a handsome diplomat (Peter Sarsgaard) who may hold the key to her future.

It becomes clear that while Jasmine scarcely deserves her fantasy world of effortless, extravagant wealth, it’s a world she absolutely belongs to and thrives in. Our sympathies are artfully scrambled; we begin to root for this over-entitled, self-destructive shrew to find love and lucre in spite of herself, lending the story a certain train-wreck fascination as it barrels toward its bitterly ironic conclusion.

The script takes a similarly complex view of its secondary characters, and what gives “Blue Jasmine” its particular integrity is its acknowledgment that, despite their obvious differences in sophistication, taste and socioeconomic background, every one of these folks may have a point. Allen’s sense of class stratification here isn’t exactly nuanced, but his sympathies are more evenly distributed than usual, and he happily reveals more than one side to every personality, a strategy that helps bring out the best in a very fine cast.



Inclined as one might be to condescend to coarse, working-class Joes like Chili and Augie (the names here are especially pungent and evocative), the film duly acknowledges that these dudes are far more admirable than their upscale counterparts, a point that Cannavale and Clay (an especially offbeat and rewarding casting choice) underscore with their mouthy, big-hearted performances. The other male roles have been cast with similar care: Baldwin, back for more after “To Rome With Love,” is almost too persuasive as a Wall Street sleaze; Louis C.K. is likable as a guy who takes a particularly randy interest in Ginger; and Alden Ehrenreich makes a welcome appearance as Hal’s Ivy Leaguer son. But besides Blanchett, it’s Hawkins who leaves the strongest impression as the sensitive and sensible Ginger, deflecting her sister’s attacks with endless patience and the occasional well-deserved telling-off. It’s the less flashy of the two roles, but Hawkins inhabits it with a graceful, unshowy depth of feeling.

While Allen displays more interest than usual in the particulars of lower-income living and even deigns to usher some of his characters into the computer age, the result can’t help but feel at times like a somewhat cushy, elevated Woody-world fantasy of workaday existence. Even Ginger’s Mission District apartment, meant to seem cramped in comparison to Jasmine’s beachside estate, looks relatively spacious considering the location. Along similar lines, Javier Aguirresarobe’s sun-dappled lensing can’t help but show off San Francisco to great advantage, as the film makes time for a walk along Ocean Beach, an amble through Chinatown, and a brief, obligatory shot of the Golden Gate Bridge. The old jazz standard “Blue Moon” makes a poignant main theme for this tale of romantic longing

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