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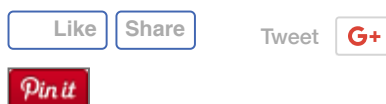
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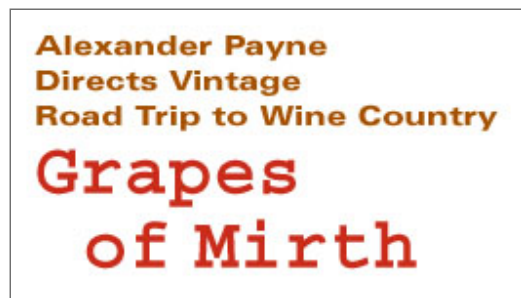
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Grapes of Mirth

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Nov 17, 2004



Features



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In a resonant scene midway through *Sideways*, Miles (Paul Giamatti) and Maya (Virginia Madsen) connect over a soul-baring dialogue about the wine they're sipping. Then, just as they're about to clinch it, Miles rushes to the bathroom to douse his face with cold water.

A man more at home with misery than happiness, Miles is yet another of the vulnerable, thwarted males that Alexander Payne has made his special province. In *About Schmidt*, Jack Nicholson's newly widowed insurance exec struggles to redeem a failed life. In *Election*, Matthew Broderick's schoolteacher gets steamrolled by a know-it-all student played by Reese Witherspoon.

Now in his fourth feature *Sideways*, co-written with Jim Taylor, Payne introduces two more hapless men lost in the muddle of modern life: refreshingly schlubby Miles, schoolteacher, unpublished novelist--and above all, wine connoisseur--still smarting from a two-year-old divorce, and his old college buddy Jack (Thomas Haden Church), a carefree TV actor now doing voiceovers, engaged to a wealthy Armenian woman. An entry in the prestigious New York Film Festival, and a hit at the Toronto Film Festival, Payne's new Fox Searchlight release is not only more accessible than his quirky earlier films, its humor is more humane and less cruel, the screenplay nuanced and tight, and the performances are masterful. (In that wine scene, the superb Giamatti conveys more with a single doleful glance than a novelist could in ten pages.)

Tapping the ever-fertile road-movie premise, Payne sends his modern-day odd couple on a last-

hurrah bender through Northern California's wine country before Jack takes the plunge into married life. Rolfe Kent's jazzy score sets up a humorous counterpoint to the men's bumbling pursuit of pleasure. While Miles is eager to sample the local grape, Jack, an over-aged horndog, is more eager to sample the local women. Faster than you can say Sauvignon Blanc, the guys round up seductive and savvy wine-bar employees Maya and Stephanie (the deliciously droll Sandra Oh, who's married to Payne). After a week of lust, bickering, and betrayal--resulting in a broken schnozz for Jack--the two buddies emerge from their trip somewhat better prepared to face adult life.

During the Toronto Film Festival, Film Journal International caught up with Payne, who is articulate, mischievous and darkly handsome. It being the director's last interview of the day--and in keeping with the film's oenophilia--the publicist broke out a bottle of red. It's probably fair to say that the wine went down more smoothly than our spiky dialogue about Payne's distinctive brand of comedy and predilection for loser types (the auteur frequently balking at the interviewer's questions).

In *Sideways*, Miles is the gloomiest of souls (not unrelated to Giamatti's Harvey Pekar in *American Splendor*), who can't resist, in Jack's phrase, going to 'the dark side.' How does Payne succeed in making depression comic? 'Gee, I dunno, I make comedies,' the director responds. 'I guess you use lines like Miles' 'I went to my therapist, but I spent most of the hour helping him with his computer.' It's also a true line from my co-writer Jim Taylor, who actually did that.'

'You're really asking, 'Who are you and Jim Taylor as writers?' Yet it's very much an extension of who we are. So you're asking, 'How are you who you are?' I'm not trying to be disingenuous--but I work very instinctively.' As does his whole team, who just know when they've got it right. Payne makes a point of telling beginning film directors, 'You are the tone. However it occurs to you, even in your own little pea-brained way, about how to shoot a scene, or what the rhythm of the acting and editing will be, it's all somehow an extension of who you are, if you're doing it honestly.'

Why is Payne drawn to characters who are losers? 'Did Chaplin ever play a hero?' he shoots back rhetorically. 'Did Buster Keaton? Laurel and Hardy? Comedy for me is interesting and important and funny only in how it is the other side of the pain and bitterness we experience. And certainly we all know that one of the great capacities of man is to have humor about bad circumstances--if only as a survival strategy. I have to say, Jim and I take comedy very seriously--it gives distance and perspective on experience.'

Moreover, Payne objects to the term 'loser.' 'Miles and Jack are both just people. Who can't relate? I can't relate to heroes. I want someone who mirrors me.' (There follows a riff about our success-oriented culture, and American Airlines, which foisted tapes about successful negotiating on the unwary traveler.) Still, it's somewhat paradoxical that Payne, who gives off a winner's aura, should identify with such hapless characters. 'Well, why wouldn't I? And it depends on how you define success. How do you know I'm not a loser and pathetic in every other aspect of my life? You don't know anything about me. I also know that it's only by a hair that I'm successful in such a difficult

endeavor as film directing. I could just as easily not have reached it. I didn't even begin working as a professional film director till I was 35.'

After studying history and literature at Stanford, Payne (now 43, the age of Miles and Jack in the film) got an MFA in film directing from UCLA. Then came what he describes as 'five years of agony' before he started working professionally. 'I know what it's like to have agony about not doing what you're really meant to do. You don't forget that.'

A native of Omaha, Nebraska, the drolly rendered setting for his two previous films, Payne, himself an oenophile, relished capturing the verdant Northern California vineyards in the film. (Wine is the virtual fifth character in *Sideways*, and Miles and Maya bond over an '88 Sassicaia, the very bottle that got Payne into wine.) Also striking, at least to this viewer, is the film's comic take on America's tasteless homes, cheesy-looking restaurants (one features a buffalo mounted on the walls) and sterile motels. Payne's locales are often as funny as his characters.

Payne gets exercised, though, at the suggestion that he's mocking Americana. 'It's just there, and it's fun. Thematically, if you want me to get into it a bit, here's Jack basically acting utterly like an animal. So we have animals and dead animals all around--the waitress is framed with a buffalo and cow behind her shoulder. What am I supposed to do, dress it up, like they do in other movies and shield the audience from the genuine ugliness of this country? You can have an affectionate identification with things without being mocking.'

Payne takes issue as well with the suggestion that Miles and especially Jack, with his L.A.-style lingo, give off a distinctively American flavor. One director, he says, told him *Sideways* is very much like a French film. And Payne was inspired by a '60s Italian comedy, Dino Risi's *Il Sorpasso*, about two guys on a road trip, one more sensual, the other more intellectual (think Jack and Miles), and perhaps meant to represent two sides of a man's soul. Payne is also keen on revitalizing the American cinema of the '70s, citing films such as *Klute* and *The Last Detail*, which avoid slickness and emphasize real people and struggles. (In *Sideways*, Payne even tried for a retro-sounding '70s soundtrack.)

The film's focus on a man's soul might just make *Sideways* more of a guy movie than something for the ladies. Still, "there's a love story in it that some women can respond to," Payne points out. And he himself is not very 'guy-y. I hate golf and I like wine and cooking and stuff like that.' Does the film express a male fantasy? After all, two middling guys blow into town and find that every woman they meet is hot to trot. Payne responds, 'All I know is, I look around and there are six million people and each one of them represents a fuck. I'm always shocked at how available people are. The world is so full of unlikely couples, don't you find?'

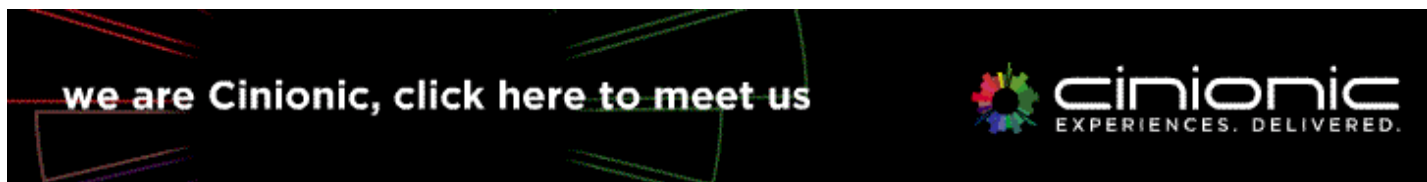
In casting his unlikely pair in *Sideways*, Payne was able to avoid choosing big stars because the producers respected his opinion and went with actors he found most appropriate. Because it lacked big stars, the film had half the budget of *About Schmidt*. 'I run a pretty tight ship,' Payne says. 'I

like a disciplined shoot. And I don't like making a movie that costs me any more than it has to. Because I don't want the pressure on myself to have to make that much money. I want my films to make money, of course--though it doesn't go into my pocket, it goes into the studio's--but if they make money, that means I can keep making movies, and that's the only thing that matters. And if I can make a movie with no stars that makes money, then maybe other directors will get a chance to as well. So I'm thinking about how my example can serve both the studios and other filmmakers.'

Next up is an original screenplay written by Payne and Jim Taylor set in America. 'It will have something to do with the times we live in,' is all Payne will reveal. 'And this time we will be making fun of people. You know, a lot of people right now are just asking to be made fun of--especially in the White House. What a wonderful discussion we've had. You're delightfully confrontational.'

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