Blu-Ray Review: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ensemble Make Trip to ‘Synecdoche, New York’ Worthwhile

Submitted by BrianTT [1] on March 16, 2009 - 12:41pm

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Blu-Ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – With one of the most ambitious screenplays of 2008 and one of the most talented ensembles in years, “Synecdoche, New York [14],” now on Blu-Ray, is a must-see for fans of Charlie Kaufman [17]’s earlier screenwriting work (“Adaptation,” “Being John Malkovich,” “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind”) and the incredible ensemble, including Philip Seymour Hoffman [11], Catherine Keener [4], Samantha Morton [13], and Michelle Williams [10].

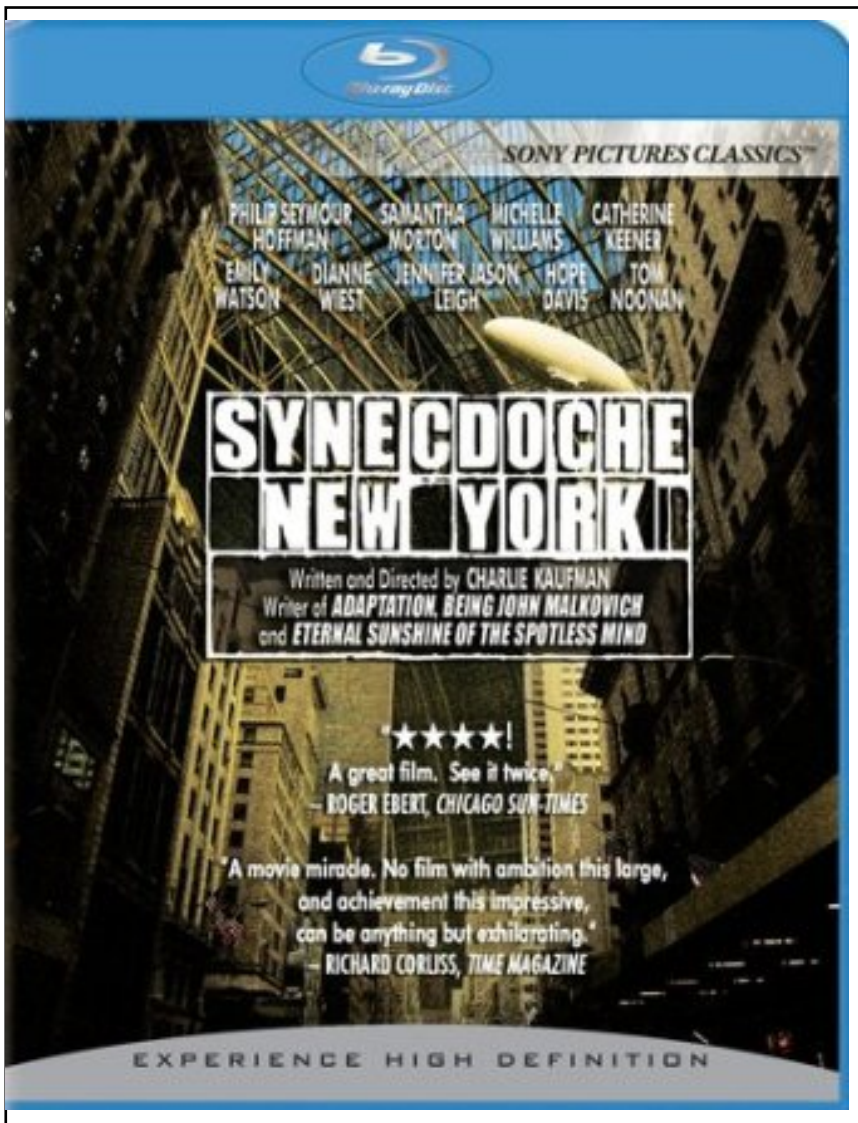
The brilliant Kaufman’s directorial debut produces, believe it or not, his least easy-to-define film, a movie that turns in on itself repeatedly until it somewhat loses its way. I was told that I needed to see it twice to really “get it,” but a Blu-Ray viewing after seeing it in theaters didn’t really change my opinion of this ambitious, well-performed, but deeply flawed motion picture.



Synecdoche, New York was released on Blu-Ray on March 10th, 2009.
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Video

The concept of “Synecdoche, New York” is so original and the cast is pitch-perfect (they won an ensemble award at the Film Independent Spirit Awards last month), but I think Kaufman’s writing requires truly masterful direction to truly come to life. “Synecdoche” is a film so

overflowing with ideas about age, art, and identity that the weight of its concepts cause it to sink more than it would under someone else’s direction.



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Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Video

It’s clever, but not nearly as much fun as it should be. Kaufman and his talented team have crafted a great mental workout, but don’t be surprised if it gives you a headache.

Philip Seymour Hoffman shines as Caden Cotard, a theatre director with increasingly troubling health problems and a distant marriage to wife Adele (Catherine Keener). Caden feels uninspired in every way, both professionally and personally. After Adele takes his daughter and moves to Berlin to become a celebrated painter, Caden gets the MacArthur grant and stages a play about (and this is my interpretation, you could have a different one) the futility of trying to recreate reality through theater.

Caden rents a warehouse, builds what becomes a city, and casts people to go about their lives, with director’s notes, of course. The director tries to find love again with Hazel (Samantha Morton) and then Claire (Michelle Williams). He tries therapy but the shrink (Hope Davis [8]) is more obsessed with her own writing than Caden’s work and he hates the influence that Adele’s friend Maria (Jennifer Jason Leigh [9]) has on his growing daughter.

Of course, all of this makes it into the “play,” with Caden eventually having to cast someone to play himself (Tom Noonan [15]) and even Hazel (Emily Watson [6]). The line between theater and reality dissolves and you start to wonder if Caden isn’t experiencing a dream sequence or perhaps you are.


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Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Video

The only way to enjoy “Synecdoche, New York” is to give in to the fact that it’s not meant to be traditionally understood. I think if you try to figure out how it all fits together or if it does at all, then you’ll merely be frustrated. “Synecdoche” is poetry, not prose. Take in the ideas and the themes and make of them what you will.

The Blu-Ray release of “Synecdoche, New York” is presented in 1080p High Definition with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio and an English Dolby TrueHD 5.1 track. Sony rarely fails to deliver with Blu-Ray and “Synecdoche” is no exception. It’s crystal clear, a great transfer.

“Synecdoche, New York” is one of those rare films where I think special features almost hurt more than help. No one can explain this piece in simple terms like you would find on a commentary track, so why bother? The conversation with Philip Seymour Hoffman in “The Story of Caden Cotard” certainly doesn’t illuminate anything. Other special features include “In and Around Synecdoche, New York,” “Infectious Diseases in Cattle: Bloggers’ Roundtable,” Screen Animations and “NFTS/Script Factory Masterclass with Charlie Kaufman”.

‘Synecdoche, New York’ is released by Sony Pictures Home Video and stars Philip Seymour Hoffman, Samantha Morton, Michelle Williams, Catherine Keener, Emily Watson, Dianne Wiest, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Hope Davis, and Tom Noonan. It was written and directed by Charlie Kaufman. It was released on March 10th, 2009. It is rated R.


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