

‘Blue Jasmine’ Puts Woody Allen Back on Top

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The auteur Woody Allen is one of the most prolific post-studio-system directors, averaging one film a year for close to 40 years. His meditations on life have become part of the culture, and he brilliantly expresses himself once again – with help from Cate Blanchett – in the emotional “Blue Jasmine.”

There are many themes in “Blue Jasmine” – mental illness, the failure to connect, family dispositions – but none more acute than Woody’s take on the class system in the United States and what defines the “American Dream.” Cate Blanchett portrays the title character of Jasmine, a multi-faceted performance tinged with an edge of a nervous breakdown. The cacophony of character types, including terrific turns by Bobby Cannavale, Peter Sarsgaard, Sally Hawkins and – wait for it – Andrew Dice Clay, offer a pastiche of the working man versus the leisure class, all driven by their sense of that position. This is a great statement, at the point in Woody Allen’s life when the assumption is that he doesn’t have much left to say. In nailing an essential slice-of-life with “Blue Jasmine,” Allen proves that he is a moralist, and a keen observer of the world around him.

Jasmine (Cate Blanchett) is on her way to San Francisco. She is escaping a desperate situation in New York City, in which her husband Hal (Alec Baldwin) has been indicted for financial malfeasance and tax evasion. She is going to move in with her sister Ginger (Sally Hawkins) and try to begin her life again. This is complicated by Ginger’s boyfriend Chili (Bobby Cannavale) and Ginger’s ex-husband Augie (Andrew Dice Clay). Hal lost a significant amount of Augie’s money in a financial scheme.



The Good Life?: Cate Blanchett and Alec Baldwin in 'Blue Jasmine'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The two sisters – both adopted – have a severe clash of social morality, as the story of Hal unfolds in flashback. In the present, Jasmine is trying to adjust to being in the working world, and Ginger is trying to balance sheltering her sister with the pressures of Chili, who wants a commitment. When Jasmine meets Dwight (Peter Sarsgaard), her luck may change, but the baggage of her circumstance could conspire against that luck.

Blanchett communicates every level of Jasmine – her drifting through life, her position of luxury, her ignorance of Hal's crimes and her struggle with working for a living – with such truth and sadness, that it's heart breaking. This amazing actor is a perfect Woody Allen player, able to turn his complex ideas into a character that represents those concepts. She astounds both as a society dame and as a put-upon dentist's receptionist. It's not that Jasmine isn't willing to try to be on her own, it's that she doesn't care enough about herself to do it. Those conflicting emotions are difficult to interpret, but within Blanchett's performance are subtle and brilliantly understandable.

Getting the right supporting cast to play off this tale of America is part of the film's genius. Andrew Dice Clay, for example, doesn't feel like his old comedy persona, and portrays a financially cuckolded working man with the right amount of heat and anger. Sally Hawkins ("Happy-Go-Lucky") understands Ginger's relationship with Jasmine so vitally, right down to the misplaced affair with a sound technician named Al (Louis C.K.). And Peter Sarsgaard is so dreadfully perfect as a widower in mourning, that nothing he does seems unreasonable.

And once again, there is Bobby Cannavale. Often a go-to guy for the working class schlub, he imbues Chili with a misplaced attitude that reflects Jasmine on another side of the mirror. He truly loves Ginger, and cannot understand her freeloader sister, her sudden break from their relationship and how to handle the conflicted emotions that emanate from these situations. Even in his inappropriateness, Cannavale stays true to his take on the character, adding a richness and sympathy to the role.



Bobby Cannavale in 'Blue Jasmine'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

What motivated Allen to write this story? He may have been angry observing the financial meltdown, and who really caused it. He may have tried to understand who this bailout shell game really hurts, the working people in America. Regardless, it is fascinating to experience the late career Woody – so hit-and-miss in the last ten years – but still swinging for the fences. "Blue Jasmine" is a grand slam.

So few people are given the position that Woody Allen enjoys, which is the ability to maintain a consistent opportunity to communicate as an artist, and to employ a shifting intuition throughout a lifetime of work. He is an American treasure, a gift to an audience who appreciates the strange machinations of our being and consequence.

"Blue Jasmine" continues its U.S. release in Chicago on August 2nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Cate Blanchett, Alec Baldwin, Sally Hawkins, Andrew Dice Clay, Bobby Cannavale, Michael Stuhlbarg, Louis C.K. and Peter Sarsgaard. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Rated "PG-13"



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