

Blue Jasmine

In recent years, director Woody Allen has shifted his cinematic focus from his beloved New York to other world cities, like London, Barcelona, Paris, and Rome. In his latest, "Blue Jasmine," he discovers a new **American** city, San Francisco, as he follows the tribulations of a woman-who-had-it-all in Manhattan but is now penniless and has to hie to San Francisco to stay at the apartment of her less-endowed sister. No comedy this, the film, rare in Allen's output, is an attempt at a character study of a woman just hanging on to what is the last shred of her dignity.

Jasmine French (Cate Blanchett) is entitled, a woman who has enjoyed the Manhattan high life through marriage to the high-flying financier Hal (Alec Baldwin), a life of luxury, world travel, glittering parties and, of course, just the right kind of "charitable" activities. Her wardrobe is matchless, her taste is impeccable, and her life's work has become—herself. That blissful life explodes when Hal is exposed as a Bernie Madoff-type swindler and goes to jail (where he eventually commits suicide), while she, lamenting a son who spurns her, loses everything and has a mental breakdown. She has nowhere else to go except to San Francisco to crash with her divorced, working class sister Ginger (Sally Hawkins) and her two boys, where she horns in on the domestic space that Ginger's new boy friend Chili (Bobby Canavale) expected to fill.

Jasmine cannot cope with her proletarian surroundings or with the working world (she flounders badly in a computer class) yet finds work as a receptionist for a nerdish dentist, Dr. Flicker (Michael Stuhlbarg), who makes a clumsy move on her. More hopeful is her later liaison with a State Department diplomat, Dwight (Peter Sarsgaard) who measures up to her standard of sophistication and who readily accepts her self-identification as an "interior decorator." But a chance meeting with Ginger's ex-husband Augie (Andrew Dice-Clay) reveals Jasmine's pretensions to Dwight, and she is ultimately left alone and bereft, talking to herself with no prospects of any kind.

I told you this was no comedy. "Blue Jasmine" plays out as sort of tale of two cities, with the foreground following Jasmine's frustrations in Ginger's world contrasted with flashbacks limning her posh existence in Manhattan with Hal (until it crashed). Allen's screenplay also plays out as a tale of two classes, with Jasmine and her One Percent lifestyle contrasted with the working stiffs among whom she must function in the Bay city. Allen has some fun with the easy swish of superfluous wealth in big money Manhattan compared with the lively vulgarity of the San Francisco lower-class crowd, but these contrasts are not really played for laughs. They exhibit an almost sociological flavor (something very new for Woody) and rather serve to underline the alien milieu Jasmine must wince her way through.

Through it all, Jasmine is prickly, opinionated, full of self-delusions about her worthiness and full of deprecation about others. Her character brought back memories of an Allen film of 35 years ago: his first drama, "Interiors," with a most unpleasant lead played by Geraldine Page (also an interior decorator). "Blue Jasmine" is, in many ways, a thankless role for Blanchett, but, I must say, she plays it beautifully and convincingly, presenting the easy hauteur of the privileged one who then shrivels from the messiness of her new, unwanted life. It is one of the best examples of personal

cluelessness recently put on film. Whether movie-goers will want to accompany Jasmine (and Allen) on her journey is another question.
(*The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 98 min.*)

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