

## Synecdoche, New York

Charlie Kauffman is one of moviedom's true originals. His time-bending, curlicue plots driven by now ludicrous, then affecting, language and peopled by now agonized, then silly, characters are a genre unto themselves.

After working as a television writer for comedian Dana Carvey, he struck gold with his first screenplay, *Being John Malkovich* (1999), a head-spinning comedy/drama that displayed his principal theme: the shifting, maddening search for one's own identity. His script was nominated for an Academy Award, as was his second, *Adaptation* (2002), wherein Nicholas Cage struggled as the screenwriter "Charlie Kauffman," contending with himself as his own brother "Donald Kauffman" (Charlie's invented twin!). The bizarre *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002) came next, followed by his masterwork so far, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), a poignant and sweet reverie about the mysteries of memory, which earned Kauffman an Oscar for best original screenplay.

Loath to repeat himself, except in terms of inventiveness, Kauffman has now come with *Synecdoche, New York*, another story of the travail of the creative artist, this one with several new twists. It is Kauffman's first attempt as director as well as writer. *Synecdoche*—for those who are not word-mavens—is usually a figure of speech by which a part stands for the whole (as "50 sail" for "50 ships" or "boards" for "stage"). In this film, Kauffman uses the term both as a symbol for his story and as a goofy pun on his opening setting, Schenectady, New York. Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a successful director of regional theater based in Schenectady who yearns for something more. His artist wife Adele (Catherine Keener) wants to stretch her creative wings, too, and heads off with their small daughter Olive to mount a show in Berlin. Troubled by his family's absence and several inexplicable health problems, his life is changed when he is awarded a MacArthur Grant and determines at last to create a play of his own, a work of towering realism and honesty for all the world to see.

With his grant money, he moves to New York City, books a gigantic warehouse and gathers an ensemble cast—all to act out the ever more intimate details of his own life. Caden instructs his cast to live out their imagined lives in a mockup of the city outside. Years pass, and as the city inside the warehouse grows, Caden's life veers further and further out of his control.

He casts his doppelganger, Sammy Barnathan (Tom Noonan) and young actress Claire (Michelle Williams) as his wife then spins out his own life as he lives it, with sequences flitting between his reality and his ever-more baroque play. More years pass, and Adele and Olive are lost to him, his narcissistic therapist, Madeline Gravis (Hope Davis) is little help, an affair with the attractive tickettaker Hazel (Samantha Morton) assuages little, yet he continues to bury himself ever deeper into his never-ending masterpiece, whose loose ends are trailing off in all directions.

What can I say? The movie is an intriguing twirl through the creative mind as it seeks to fashion a Major Work (two other film parallels come to mind, Fellini's magnum opus *8 ½* and Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*).

*Synecdoche* is acted with a string of earnest, yet deadpan performances that overlay a palpable realism on what gradually becomes a willful fantasy. The effect is

puzzling, then jarring, then even exhilarating as you come to realize that Caden Cotard is grinding away at his work for more than 20 years, ever tinkering with the play that is, in reality, his own life. Even cleverer, the film offers a kind of Moebius strip plot wherein, as new incidents happen in Caden's life, they are almost immediately transformed into the next scene in his whirligig drama. Thus, an actress will play the role of his wife, only to have herself depicted by another actress playing the actress who's playing his wife... And so on.

Philip Seymour Hoffman is Caden to a tee. The actor has perfected the mien and demeanor of the hapless schlub in other roles (see last year's *The Savages*, or *Owning Mahoney* or *Boogie Nights*) and plays the put-upon playwright as a sober, groping figure whose ambitions are ever out of reach of his talent. The surprises of the picture's plot are heightened because we are seeing all developments from the thwarted perspective of Caden himself, with his days turning into months and his years morphing into decades, and Hoffman pulls us along through this time travel with his always convincing, shambling presence.

*Synecdoche, New York*, for this reviewer, goes on too long and chases its own tail one too many times. The last switches in identity are so fast as to lose our comprehension. The picture demands attention, to be sure, and is not a facile evening of entertainment. Still, it is worth a visit—maybe a second visit—for its loopy intelligence, its serio-comic daring, and its aim to try something distinctive in American cinema. (*The film is rated "R", and runs 124 mins.*)

(November 2008)