

The French Dispatch

From singular director Wes Anderson comes his tenth feature film, “The French Dispatch,” which he has described as “a love letter to journalists set at an outpost of an American newspaper in the fictional 20th-century French city of Ennui-sur-Blasé.” The film is inspired by Anderson's love of *The New Yorker*, with some characters and events based on real-life equivalents from the magazine. It is also a “portmanteau” film, i.e., an anthology of three distinct stories that have appeared in the *Dispatch*, written by its idiosyncratic expatriate staff.

Bill Murray, a long-time favorite of Anderson's (he has appeared in every one of the director's films), plays the *Dispatch*'s editor, Arthur Howitzer, Jr., a soft-spoken curmudgeon, whose eclectic staff includes Herbert Sazerac, a travel writer (Owen Wilson), Alumna (Elizabeth Moss), the copy editor, and Hermes Jones (Jason Schwartzman) the magazine's cartoonist.

The first of the three articles (“The Concrete Masterpiece”) centers on Julien Cadazio (Adrien Brody) a fervent art dealer interested in the work of a violent prison inmate Moses Rosenthaler (Benicio del Toro), housed in the section for the criminally insane. This piece is based on a *New Yorker* series covering the real-life art dealer [Lord Duveen](#) and is narrated by *Dispatch* writer J.K.L. Berensen (Tilda Swinton). French star Lea Seydoux plays Rosenthaler's prison guard, Simone, who serves as his muse, posing for him nude which he envisions as an abstract impressionistic jumble, an image that captures Cadazio. The convict follows up with an expansive series of similar frescos.

The second tale takes off from the May 1968 student occupation protests (inspired by *New Yorker* articles originally written by [Mavis Gallant](#)). Called “Revisions to a Manifesto” in the film, it is written by staffer Lucinda Krementz (Frances McDormand), a no-nonsense journalist profiling the student revolutionaries, which include chess-playing Zeffirelli (Timotheé Chalamet) and his obdurate girlfriend Juliette (Lyna Khoudri). Zeffirelli is the poetic voice of the “revolution” while his Juliette is its enforcer.

The third item, entitled “The Private Dining Room of the Police Commissioner,” is written by Roebuck Wright (Jeffery Wright), a food journalist at the *Dispatch*. At a dinner with the Police Commissioner (Mathieu Amalric), Wright and others learn that his son Gigi has been

kidnapped, and Lt, Nescaffier (Steven Park), a noted chef as well as a police officer, is on the case. Edward Norton (a chauffeur) and Saoirse Ronan (a showgirl) are part of the kidnapping gang who are run down by the police and eventually succumb in a shoot-out.

Let it be known that “The French Dispatch” could be none other than a Wes Anderson film. All the quirks of his style are there: the highly-stylized jewel box set-ups, the bare-bones, dead-pan dialogue, the symmetry of the frames, the occasional animation, the ever present whimsy and preciousness. Here they are on full display for another mellow comedy (the film is especially reminiscent of “Grand Hotel Budapest”), which, however, for this observer, misses the mark. It seems like Wes gone amok.

The best of the three tales is “Masterpiece,” principally because the set-up is distinctive and unexpected, and the deadpan delivery works best (del Toro and Brody seem comfortable in their stilted dialogue). It is the least cloying of the three with a semi-clever take on contemporary art. The “Manifesto” sequence is a narrative mess, the objective journalist ill-contrasting with the half-committed, willful youth aching for a vague “revolution.” It tries to be a mock of clueless insurgents (Chalamet seems particularly ill-cast) which renders little but confusion. The “Dining Room” is a complete farrago, with too many oddball characters doing too many weird things, all ending in a mindless and confusing police chase.

Other elements seem capricious, like the shifting from black-and-white to color in each segment, without apparent purpose or point. Similarly, though Anderson has summoned, as usual, an unusually varied and intriguing cast, he has so much talent he gives many of them (e.g., Moss, Schwartzman, Swinton, Norton, Ronan, Amalric, etc.) very little to do.

If these assessments seem harsh, consider them disappointing outcomes from a director this reviewer as often enjoyed and admired. This time he has taken the ingredients of his now-familiar schtick and just left them too long on the stove.

(This film is rated “R” and runs 103 mins.)

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