

Clever, well-read. And what else?

The Royal Tenenbaums, directed by Wes Anderson

By David Walsh
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The *Royal Tenenbaums*, directed by Wes Anderson, co-written by Anderson and Owen Wilson

Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson previously collaborated on *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*. Their new comic effort, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, concerns a troubled family in an imaginary, vaguely bygone New York City of brownstones, gypsy cabs and gifted, unhappy children. Royal Tenenbaum left his wife, Etheline, and family decades ago. His three offspring—Chas, Richie and Margot—all excelled at a young age (as a financier, tennis player and playwright, respectively) and, for one reason or another, froze at a certain stage of development. Now advanced in years, Royal seeks some kind of reconciliation with those he abandoned. Having been kicked out of his hotel for nonpayment, he fakes stomach cancer and talks his way back into the family home. His three children all end up living there once again as well.

There are amusing things here. Gene Hackman as Royal is a consistent delight. A more or less unrepentant sinner, Royal stole from his son Chas's safety deposit box (the latter had him disbarred as a lawyer), insists on introducing Margot, much to her obvious unhappiness, as "my adopted daughter" and generally misbehaves. In an attempt to be sympathetic to his young grandsons, who have recently lost their mother, Royal declares, "I'm very sorry for your loss. Your mother was a very attractive woman." Hackman bestows on the line just the right proportions of sincerity, gaucheness and leering.

There is something liberating about the manner in which Anderson and Wilson set about their work. They have a feeling for nonsense and the heightened-unreal (including a nonexistent, parallel New York that contains "Archer Avenue," "Mockingbird Heights," "the Public Archives," "the 375th Street Y," as well as public transport like the "Irving Island Ferry," "the 22nd Avenue Express" and ubiquitous "Greenline" buses). And their work stands out in the bleak landscape of contemporary cinema for its imagination and willingness to do the unusual. A character can be hurtled back and forth in time, around the globe, in and out of the headlines, in and out of bed or a marriage, in an instant. A narrator's voice-over, chapter headings, proscenium arches, categories, titles, boxes, frames, labels—all sorts of artificial and obtrusive devices are put to use; the filmmakers instinctively and quite

rightly rebel against the category of the so-called specifically "cinematic," a term that has become so horribly restrictive and, more often than not, an excuse for laziness.

Audiences respond to all this. Large numbers of people, whether they fully realize it or not, are tired of the bland, stupid, bombastic and predictable in movies. Here, we realize with genuine pleasure, are filmmakers capable of doing the *unexpected*, miracle of miracles! And of devoting some thought to sets, costumes, make-up, characters' names, locales. For better or worse, thinking human beings have worked over the material contained in the film. It is not simply the congealed expression of prevailing artistic or social consciousness.

Despite its many splendid qualities, why then is the film ultimately so unsatisfying?

It appears, in the first place, to be a generational problem. Whenever Royal and his confederates Pagoda (Kumar Pallana) and Dusty (Seymour Cassel) are on screen the film feels right or nearly right: odd, textured, old-fashioned, ironic, sincere.

The children's roles, on the other hand, are largely one-dimensional and flat. Chas (Ben Stiller) is particularly unsatisfying, but Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow) also grows tiring, and Richie (Luke Wilson) doesn't add up to that much.

It seems remarkable, at first glance, that Anderson has a more successful time dealing with the older people than the younger. He appears attracted to the past, or at least the literary past. The film pays tribute to a variety of such sources. This is from the production notes:

"The entire film is steeped in some kind of New York literary history," Anderson explains, noting that many of the characters in the movie, their personalities, temperaments, habits, and emotional exploits, could have easily come off the pages of the *New Yorker* magazine as it existed in a bygone era.

"Authors like Joseph Mitchell, A.J. Liebling, Lillian Ross, J.D. Salinger, John O'Hara, E.B. White, James Thurber, all of them provided inspiration for the film in ways I'm not completely conscious of. In recent years I've read in back date *New Yorkers* various profiles of people you never heard of—intelligent, eccentric, unconventional personalities, the kind of profiles they don't write any more—and these profiles and personalities have also influenced me.' In fact, Anderson grew up reading the *New Yorker*, and has every issue of the

magazine from the past 40 years in his office.

“But the *New Yorker* and its world is not the only source of inspiration for the new film. ‘I also read a lot of Kaufman and Hart,’ Anderson says, referring to playwrights George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, ‘including their play, *You Can’t Take It With You*.’

“Hart’s autobiography *Act One*, as well as Hart and Kaufman themselves are also influences, as are stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald, plays and journalism by S.N. Berhman, and Louis Malle’s *The Fire Within*.”

Whether one accepts the *New Yorker* magazine of an earlier day as a high point of American literary history or not, it is all to the good that a filmmaker indicates the ability to read. I prefer Anderson’s sources to those of a Quentin Tarantino (who allegedly spent the 1980s working in a Los Angeles video store watching every film in stock).

I have no difficulty, as things in themselves, with the film’s “bookish” quality, its self-consciousness, its nostalgia, even its never-ending gags and gimmicks. One doesn’t feel that Anderson is simply pleased with himself, although that element is present. The chief problem with the film, it seems to me, lies elsewhere.

If one takes the film at face value and assumes, contrary to most critics, that its narrative *does* matter, then this is a study of three young adults whose lives have turned out wretchedly. Early promise and brilliance have given way over the past two decades to “failure, betrayal, and disaster,” as the film’s narrator observes. The work is comic in tone, but its subject is no joking matter. It is legitimate, and thoroughly American. (Co-producer Scott Rudin intriguingly notes that what “started out to be more about geniuses, ended up being more about failure.”)

Don’t such stories abound? The young athlete or performer who burns out, the artist whose career goes steadily downhill after a startling initial triumph, the wealthy professional who finds him or herself emotionally shut off from the rest of humanity. One might add to that the wreckage of so many “celebrities”’ lives and the wreckage of so many of their children’s lives. Something is making “successful” people in America terribly unhappy. (A recent study found that material wealth was not making Americans happy, in general.) Could this be in part because their genius, such as it is, is subordinated to the brutal interests of money and power? That their talents, instead of enlightening and liberating, are trivialized, commodified and used to exploit and manipulate.

This seems at the very least a fruitful avenue for artistic exploration. Unfortunately, after raising the fascinating theme of “failure, betrayal, and disaster,” Anderson and Wilson make almost nothing of it. The problem for the three younger Tenenbaums turns out to have simply been their father’s lack of affection, his misconduct, unreliability, abandonment, etc. We are rudely shoved back into the suffocating sphere of contemporary talk-show and “pop” psychology: one must

“take responsibility for one’s actions,” “failures in life can destroy one or can give one the opportunity to reconnect” (this from co-producer Barry Mendel).

This is silly and unconvincing, and helps explain why the three young people never truly come to life. Parents exert a powerful influence, but theirs is not the only one at work. Anderson and Wilson are obliged to freeze the three Tenenbaums in time (literally, the latter even have comically identical appearances as children and adults) because they have chosen to remove them from the operations of history and social life. A serious (or comic, or serious-comic) approach would have obliged the filmmakers to look critically at the past two decades of American life with its disastrous social and psychic consequences. This they’ve barred themselves from doing, and the result is artistically damaging.

Hackman is no doubt a fine actor, but Royal and his generation come so much to the fore primarily because of the void created by the filmmakers’ inability to make anything of the past 20 years in the younger characters’ lives. Instead of treating the complex ways in which life and society shape human beings, the filmmakers serve up characters who are traumatized as children and reappear, decades later, unchanged.

Anderson and Wilson choose to retreat into fairly tame semi-literary fantasy, on the one hand, and a relatively conformist drama of family reconciliation, on the other. Says Owen Wilson: “What the story says is that even though everyone goes through hell with their family, still—as corny as it sounds—family members are still the ones you have to be close to, and really the only ones who will understand what you’re going through. We don’t balk at showing some of the rough stuff families endure, but we show in the end that it’s worth it.”

This is not impressive stuff, to say the least. That the film hardly registers a note of protest about life in America is an obvious weakness. Anderson and Wilson run the risk of becoming iconoclasts of a very harmless variety. (In any event, if he’s such an iconoclast, what is Owen Wilson doing in the militarist and chauvinist drivel, *Behind Enemy Lines*?) Wes Anderson is quoted as saying that *The Royal Tenenbaums*, as compared with *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*, “is more directly connected with issues of family, issues that are deeply personal, emotional and serious.” A serious film requires a rigorous approach to life. At this point, Wilson and Anderson come across as bright, amusing, and without a great deal to say.

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