

# The physician at the movies

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Cate Blanchett in *Blue Jasmine*, directed by Woody Allen. © Sony Pictures Classics

## Blue Jasmine

Starring Cate Blanchett, Alec Baldwin, Andrew Dice Clay, and Sally Hawkins.

Directed by Woody Allen. Running time 98 minutes. Rated PG-13.

Woody Allen, who doesn't attend the Oscars, has created roles that have garnered eleven Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress nominations with five Academy Award winners.<sup>1</sup> The most memorable is Diane Keaton's quirky but lovable Annie Hall. Other nominees portray decidedly less lovable women bordering on the despicable. The other winners were actresses who played against type: Dianne Wiest (*Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Bullets Over Broadway*), Mia Sorvino (*Mighty Aphrodite*), and Penelope Cruz (*Vicki Cristina Barcelona*). By contrast, male roles have received four nominations with only Michael Caine winning for best actor in *Hannah and Her Sisters*.<sup>2</sup>



The latest shoo-in is Cate Blanchet for her extraordinary performance as a really mixed up and downright nasty woman in Allen's forty-eighth and latest film. Jasmine (née Jeannette) is married to slick businessman Hal (Alec Baldwin). They live in an elegant Upper East Side Manhattan apartment, summer in the Hamptons, attend charity galas, and otherwise enjoy the lifestyle of the New York rich and famous who don't produce anything but make money off deal-making.

Jasmine appears to be the only one who doesn't know that Hal is a world-class womanizer; she is apparently blinded by the diamond necklaces and bracelets he showers upon her. When Hal's business crashes down and he is indicted and put in jail for creating a Ponzi scheme, Jasmine is devastated. Unable to bear the ignominy and having lost millions, Hal commits suicide, leaving Jasmine untethered and bereft of her apartment and possessions, which are garnished. Popping Xanax, which she washes down with martinis (one of her more memorable lines is, "Who do I have to sleep with to get a Stoli martini?"<sup>3</sup>), she moves in with her sister Ginger (Sally

Hawkins) in a really downscale apartment in San Francisco. Emotionally fragile but still haughty and superior, she disapproves of Ginger's boyfriend Chili (Bobby Cannavale), who has to move out of the apartment to accommodate Jasmine. He turns out to be a very violent guy who rips up the store where Ginger works as a checkout clerk. Jasmine tells Ginger that Chili is another loser like Ginger's ex-husband Augie, played by Andrew Dice Clay. (I had never seen any performances by Clay who according to Don Steinberg "calls himself 'the most vile comic ever to walk on a stage.' He became a rock star of stand-up comedy in the late 1980s as a filthy-mouthed braggart, selling out Madison Square Garden telling vulgar versions of nursery rhymes. He was vilified by women's groups and gay groups for his material."<sup>4</sup>) Playing against type, he is the most sympathetic of the film's characters. It turns out that Ginger and Augie won the lottery. Jasmine suggested they invest the money with Hal, and they lost everything, which led to their breakup.

Accepting Jasmine's advice, Ginger takes up with Al (Louis C.K.), a sound engineer who seems to be a step up from Chili. He turns out to be another loser, married and unwilling to divorce his wife. Jasmine, who has never worked a day in her life, starts taking a course in interior design while working as a receptionist in a dentist's office and doing a pretty bad job of it. The dentist hits on her and she quits. Then the seemingly perfect match appears, Dwight (Peter Sarsgaard), a wealthy diplomat who is enamored with her. He has money, standing, and connections; she has the beauty and sophistication to be a good consort. She will design his new house and they will marry. Then he finds out that her background story is completely false and dumps her. Reeling, she learns that her son is working in San Francisco and seeks him out only to find that he hates her and wants nothing to do with her because of something that she did that is not revealed until the end. You get the picture: this is one mixed up lady and ninety minutes in her company is almost enough to make one reach for that antidepressant bottle that she carries around with her. I'm ready to give her the Academy Award and be rid of her. I wish Allen would use his great talent to create warm-hearted and inspiring characters. *Annie Hall 2*, anyone?

#### References

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2. Podhoretz J. Feminine mistake: The high cost, and sweet rewards, of Woody Allen's vision of women. *Weekly Standard* 2013 Aug 12: 39.
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4. Steinberg D. The Dice gets the role. *Wall Street J* 2013 Jul 19: D5.

#### Enough Said

Starring James Gandolfini, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Toni Collette, and Catherine Keener.

Directed by Nicole Holofcener. Running time 93 minutes.

Rated PG-13.

I was glad to get the notice of this screening. It had been a trying period and I needed some laughs. The film didn't disappoint, especially in the first half. The very witty dialogue in the mode of *When Harry Met Sally* is enhanced by a talented pair of actors, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and James Gandolfini, who honed their skills on television. Gandolfini (Albert) the star of *The Sopranos* is so natural, it's hard to believe he's acting. His performance is so good that it magnifies the regret about his recent death of a heart attack at fifty-one. Louis-Dreyfus (Eva) who played the role of Elaine on *Seinfeld* has perfected the art of using facial expressions that are just as funny as the lines themselves. Unfortunately, some of the lines were drowned out by a person guffawing in the almost packed audience.

Dreyfus plays a divorced masseuse or massage therapist who is invited to a party that seems like another dead end for meeting Mr. Right. She tells the couple who brought her that no one appeals to her. Albert, a divorced curator of a Los Angeles television history museum, makes the same comment. But their words are belied by their well-matched senses of humor and easy repartee. Days later, Albert invites Eva out on a date. Despite her misgivings about this self-confessed portly slob, she agrees, and begins to take a liking to him. After their first date, they shake hands. On the second date, they begin a series of awkward, and to my mind too many filmed



Catherine Keener in *Enough Said*. © Fox Searchlight Pictures



James Gandolfini, Julia Louis-Dreyfus star in *Enough Said*. © Fox Searchlight Pictures

sleepovers. In short, the story focuses on two divorced people coming together and the difficulty in navigating a relationship the second time around. Those who have been divorced might be able to relate better to the film than I, who was fortunate to have been married to a wonderful woman for over thirty-eight years before she died of breast cancer in 2004.<sup>1</sup>

Another audience connector involves both of them having daughters who are going off to college, and being parents who are facing the empty nest like the friend who joined me at the screening. The parting scene at the airport is well done. Albert's daughter Tess (Eve Hewson), who is off to Parsons School of Design, seems to have inherited the disposition of her mother, self-absorbed published poet Marianne (exquisitely played by Catherine Keener). She puts down Eva's daughter Ellen (Tracey Fairaway), who is going to Sarah Lawrence, which Tess proclaims isn't what it used to be. I'm not sure what Sarah Lawrence alums think about this, but I guess any mention is useful, especially since Eva sports a Sarah Lawrence sweatshirt which might otherwise be considered a product placement like the Taittinger champagne she pours out at their brunch.

The second half of the film introduces a major plot twist in which Marianne becomes a client of Eva and rags on her ex, with neither knowing the connection. When Eva sees Albert's daughter, she gets the picture. The second part seems like it was written by another screenwriter, with Eva exclaiming in potty-mouth language to her friend Sarah (Toni Collette), something that was absent before and is dropped just as quickly. She becomes less appealing when her daughter's friend Chloe (Tavi Gevenson), who likes their house better than her own, asks whether she should let her boyfriend go all the way. Eva confirms that Tess is a virgin and tells her to do what feels good to do. When she tells her they did it, Eva

praises her. At the end of the film the girl's mother tells Eva that she is the girl's mother, not her, and angrily berates her for the advice she has given her.

During the second half Eva becomes creepy, using what she heard about Albert's bad points to alienate and embarrass him. Later when we meet her ex, one senses that she was the principal party causing the divorce. Played by Toby Huss who was in the Wiz episode on *Seinfeld*, he seems to be very level-headed and caring. He has re-married to a widow, which Eva doesn't learn until she unleashes a wisecrack about them. As for Albert and the loopy poet, if one wants to pin the tail on the donkey, she seems to be the reason their marriage failed. Her judgmental and self-referential manner contrasts with his sweeter, more humble, and lighthearted disposition. The second half drags as Albert realizes what Eva has been doing and they separate. Still it ends on an up note with a few more laughs. Despite my reservations, I would recommend the film.

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#### Call Northside 777 (1948)

Starring James Stewart, Lee J. Cobb, and Richard Conte.  
Directed by Henry Hathaway. Black and white. Running time  
111 minutes. Not rated.

I will be reviewing some old films that I think you might not have heard of and which you might enjoy. This one is based on a true story adapted from *Chicago Times* articles by James P. Maguire. It is set in a grittier Chicago of the late 1930s and 1940s picturing the Merchandise Mart, the Holy Trinity Polish Mission, the Wrigley Building, and the neighborhood around the stockyards with a bar on every corner. The characters are





Top, *Call Northside 777* movie poster, 1948. Right, James Stewart, star of *Call Northside 777*. © 20th Century-Fox



believable. The cast is stellar.

Told in the documentary style of *Naked City*, it opens with a *Times* ad offering \$5000 for information in connection with the murder of a policeman, for which Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte), who claims innocence, is serving a ninety-nine-year sentence. It's the heyday of newspapers, signified by the newspapers coming hot off the presses and being bundled to go into the delivery truck. The *Times* managing editor Brian Kelly (Lee J. Cobb) calls in reporter P. J. McNeal (James Stewart) to follow up. He begins his investigation in a municipal building where the ad-placer, a Polish cleaning woman, is scrubbing floors and steps. That struck a responsive chord with me because when I was a boy I lived in a cold-water flat with my extended family,<sup>2</sup> I used to join my Italian grandmother when she worked the 4:00 to 12:00 shift as a cleaning woman in Brooklyn's Borough Hall.

McNeal learns that Mrs. Ciecsek (Kasia Orzazewski) worked eleven years to get \$5000, a lot of money in those days, that might tempt someone to step forward with new evidence to clear her son, who was apparently framed. In 1932, the year of the murder during Prohibition, there was a close relationship between corrupt policemen, organized crime members, and speakeasy owners. All sides are anxious to get a quick conviction. The film is filled with nice little touches such as when McNeal goes home and after dinner, sits down with his wife to do a jigsaw puzzle as he tells her about the case he is working on. This also resonated with me in that it was our family's favorite after-dinner pastime as attested to by the many completed puzzles around ours and my daughter's house where our prized 2000-piece Casablanca puzzle resides.

McNeal visits Ciecsek in the penitentiary. There are interesting posted rules governing where inmates may meet and kiss relatives. McNeal, the typical cynical journalist who has seen and heard it all—including the fact that all prisoners are innocent—questions the warden, who says that Ciecsek is a

model prisoner who works in the hospital and may be that one who is really innocent. McNeal begins a series of interviews and learns that everyone except the prosecutor and the jury thought he was innocent, including the judge, who has since died. The interviews lead to a series of front page articles. Ciecsek submits to a polygraph or lie detector test even though he is told if that if he fails he is “cooked” but if he passes, it would be inadmissible in court. Leonarde Keeler, the inventor of the polygraph, administers the test in the movie. In one of the articles, McNeal reveals the story of Ciecsek's wife, who was faithful to him but divorced him at his insistence so that she could marry a man who promised to care for her and their son. The story is accompanied by a photo that infuriates Ciecsek by compromising their anonymity and he tells McNeal to call off the search. McNeal, who is becoming unsure of Ciecsek's innocence, makes one more effort to find someone in the bars who knows something. There is an interesting twist at the end. It's an enjoyable travel back in time.

#### Reference

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