

✓ **Sideways (15)**

27th March 2006

Director: **Alexander Payne**
US 2004

Running time : 127 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Paul Giamatti** (Miles Raymond), **Thomas Haden Church** (Jack), **Virginia Madsen** (Maya), **Sandra Oh** (Stephanie), **Patrick Gallagher** (Gary the Bartender).

SCRIPT: **Alexander Payne, Jim Taylor** from a novel by **Rex Pickett**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Phedon Papamichael**. EDITING: **Kevin Tent**. MUSIC: **Rolfe Kent, Francisco Tárrega** (guitar composition "Recuerdos de la Alhambra").

In the opening scene of Payne's sardonic, forty-something comedy we see Miles, the film's leading character, rising late and somewhat the worse for wear in order to answer the 'phone. It is his old college roommate for whom he is to be best man, and he is supposed to have left already to pick him up from his future in-laws and take him on a stag trip.

It is established with deft economy of means that our heroes have not quite got it together. Miles lies about how ready he is to leave, then settles down in the bathroom with a book, chooses some bottles of wine and has breakfast in town.

Next we meet Jack, annoyed at Miles, ill at ease with his fiancée's family and anxious to be away. Something about his haste tells us he is not altogether happy about the wedding.

Thus Payne sets out his stall and lets us do some detective work at the same time. Both principal characters are victims of what one might term middle-aged *ennui*. Childless, and for the moment spouseless, they are free to feel disoriented or behave irresponsibly. It is this territory of potentiality, which could turn reassuringly affirmative or go horribly pear-shaped, that *Sideways* appetisingly occupies. It's a film about life's second chances, those that work and those that don't.

It soon transpires that Miles and Jack have slightly differing expectations of their week together. Miles is intending to take Jack on a tour of some of his favourite Californian vineyards and wineries, and get in a couple of rounds of golf in collegiate male seclusion. Jack meanwhile is intent on getting his friend over his no-longer-recent divorce and into bed with another female as quickly as possible. He is also planning on getting himself laid as a farewell to the single life.

For a while things go smoothly according to Jack's wishes and, in spite of Miles's misgivings, both men 'make out': Miles runs into Maya, an acquaintance and fellow oenophile who also happens to be both beautiful and available; Jack flirts with and picks up Stephanie, a winery employee, and the four of them go out together on double and single dates. However, the wedding approaches and Jack's deception could, if exposed, jeopardise Miles's budding relationship.

More than just a comedy about a guy who at last finds a girl who appreciates wine, only to have his mate louse it all up, Payne's film is a buddy movie about friends who begin to realize the only thing they have in common is the past. The one is uptight, irascible, diffident, erudite, the other happy-go-lucky and reckless, chewing gum during wine tasting and thinking only as far as his next lay. Life has moved on and entrenched their differences. Miles's marriage has failed and his book is not finding a publisher. Jack's soap star days are over and he has never really bothered to re-equip for that eventuality; his impending marriage is a desperate attempt to do something with his life before it is too late.

In the end we appreciate both Miles and Jack for all their imperfections, not least because they are such fun to be around. As Miles likens himself to the fragile Pinot grape, maybe Jack is the brash Merlot he so despises; but both make good wine in the right conditions.

David Clare