

**Sideways.** Directed by Alexander Payne. Starring... ooopsy daisy... who? Well, Thomas Hayden Church is the dumb guy from *Wings*; the rest of them you've never heard of: Virginia Madsen, Sandra Oh, Paul Giamatti, and some reeeeeeeally unlucky big fat guy who gets paid scale to run down the street naked, screen debut not sure just where I'd wanna list on that ac-toor resume ("Wagged my wahwah at world—a *closeup*, too—in fleeting moments of *Sideways*"?).

One of those films (Woody Allen's made some) that turn on how funny you think it is to be a loser and to what extent you entertain the delusion that self-abasement will take you to Oz.

This guy Payne did *Schmidt*, that critically-praised sleepwalk by Jack Nicholson, whose somnambulism routinely snags him Oscar™ bids. This film is hauling in three and a half and four stars out there from the heavy hitters for a sleepwalk by *two* guys (on account of *two* times zero is...). *Brilliant*, they're calling it. *Satirical*, they're saying. Satire, it turns out, of the life us soulless washouts lead, sunken in boredom and failure, consigned to solitude; still dreaming of joy but daren't risk lunging for it when by chance it breezes by (usually packed in a pair of tight jeans, be it noted): *satura*, oddly enough, is Latin for "I'm brilliant; you're a soulless washout." We stumble into a kind of *Waiting for Pinot* here, where two lemons embark on a soiled and silly odyssey (Greek for "It ain't here" and what one guy has translated "Odd, I see...") before the one of them shuts down his life (and hope, evidently) through a half-hearted marriage to a young woman clearly bent on unriddling him. Unlikely buddies since college, Miles (Giamatti, as a mousy little man, pudgy, balding, riddled with neuroses, haunted with doubts, from which the recent abandonment by his way-too-uptown wife does nothing to detract) and Jack (Church, who plays a fading hustler and used up pretty boy, down on his luck—and down on his talent—ac-toor, who's fallen from bit parts in the real cinee-mah to soaps to advertisements to—evidently the last stop on this line—those "paid programming" spots you see at 0200 while surfing satellite, yet still a wiseapple and still charming enough to snag the odd waitress). And that's his plan: accede to Miles' bachelor scheme to visit the California wine country for a few days together before that long desert of marriage but contrive at the same time one last sexual adventure for himself (though we have the impression his grip on conventional morality is such that marriage ain't long gonna deter his self-validation through nookie, as Freud—or one of them—used to call adultery) *annnnnnnd* get Miles' recalcitrant and unappetizing ashes hauled at the same time, magnanimous gesture toward the lesser of the species, namely a guy with no clue how to talk Tiffany out of a bar. So, with this premise, we're off...

At a flaking motel near the vineyards, they run into Maya (Madsen, fading floozy playing a fading floozy, but with grace—way too much for the ambience into which they set her, by the way: check it out, see how many Master's candidates in oenology, sensitive to liter-a-choor and outraged by infractions to booshwah decency *you* bump into at the local flop shop—and a predisposition toward the wine-loving Miles) along with Stephanie (Sandra Oh, earth urchin, fierce, sensual, bawdy, hungry, drawn to the feral appeal of a Jack... *and* of a Bob *and* of a Lou *and* of a Sam *and* of a Bruce *and* ...on and on. Curious family: mom appears to be an Okie, Stephanie Asian, her daughter Black, admirable if inexplicable ecumenism), whom they invite out, wheedle, and eventually cozen into bed, Jack immediately and Miles after a long hem and haw, mostly with himself since Maya looks willing enough from the get-go. Miles plunges over Maya, admiring her energy, her vitality, her patinaed beauty; Jack *seems* to fall for Stephanie,

*seems* to adore her little girl, *seems* taken by her world and her unlacquered earnestness. Whoa! We may have a match here: Two sets of essentially simple essentially abject loners, who both inter-infect and cross-pollinate (he likes him and him he; she likes her and her she; she likes him and so on...). We could put an end to this thing here and have a little morality tale about somebody for everybody and there's a tight jeans—if slightly tarnished—pearl out there for you, buddy, if you'll just look around and have the courage to say sommat to her one of these days when she dumps that pizza on your plate... except... except... uh oh, mememember that Hollywood screenwriters' how-to book? Gots to have a *downer* just before the last act and then fight your way back up... if you can. Sooooo... Stephanie and Maya find out about the boys' deception: that Jack's gonna get married; that Miles went along with it. Rupture and hard feelings. How we gonna get back up there to felicity? Or are we? What *is* the message anyhow? Is life happy? What would be, like, a *heavy* statement to make here in the closing scenes? Take your time. Think Hollywood. Think pathos. Think seven figures. How about we rip one guy's heart out and consign the other to spiritless monotony and hypocrisy... forever? That pretty much how things look to a Hollywood *auteur*? How they look to you? Misery, boredom, dejection, exile? Hard to be heavy... happy.

As a footsie note, you'll find many of the scenes funny (if vulgar), disinclined though you may be to laugh at creatures already afflicted by nature, fate, economics (Miles is a schoolteacher; Maya and Stephanie waitresses; Jack a ~~who~~ shill). But the real yucks (and perhaps the *real* vulgarity) come from the parody of wine tasting and all that hieratic ceremonial of lifting glasses, sniffing stuff ("Get your nose right in there..." good advice in any number of situations), sloshing around the glass (*right kind* of glass, by the way), rinsing the mouth ("Are you chewing *gum*?"), and pronouncing through some dubious combination of poetical and technical language an impenetrable verdict ("Jejune yet curiously sedulous," for instance) on the bibosity or gustitude of this or that *cru* (French for "Go ahead, Marie-Sophie. Nobody'll notice."), even parody of *parody* as Jack, who ain't got the first clue, simply mimics and them even embroiders Miles' rituals. For Jack, alcohol—any kind—is a means for uninhibiting tight jeans fee-males but at the same time for swaddling himself in oblivion when even *his* thick wit can't conceal where he's headed; for Miles, though, wine—not beer or the hard stuff—elevates the soul, ushers him into that small corner of life where he's a master, a *connoisseur* (variously spelt and even variouslier pronounced), just this once... a *winner*. Whoa! Heavy. Needless to say, only playing at the Biograph. Catch it on video.