



Miles (Paul Giamatti) and Maya (Virginia Madsen).

Talking Heads

Friendship, love and vino

SIDEWAYS: Directed by Alexander Payne. Written by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, based on the novel by Rex Pickett. Produced by Michael London. Cinematography, Phedon Papamichael. Production design, Jane Ann Stewart. Editor, Kevin Tent. Costume design, Wendy Chuck. Music supervisor, Dondi Bastone. Composer, Rolfe Kent. Starring Paul Giamatti and Thomas Hayden Church, with Virginia Madsen and Sandra Oh. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2004. R. 124 minutes.

A delightful character-driven film and one of the best of the 2004 awards season, Alexander Payne's modest social comedy is set in central California wine country — the Santa Ynez Valley in Santa Barbara County — with its beautiful, sere rolling hills, lush vineyards, unpolished vintner's tasting rooms and trendy restaurants.

Miles Raymond (Paul Giamatti, *American Splendor*) is a middle school teacher who would like to be thought of as a writer. He's been depressed since his divorce two years earlier, but as the film opens, his latest novel, *The Day After Tomorrow*, is being considered by a low-end publisher. Miles' best friend, Jack Lopate (Thomas Hayden Church, "Wings"), is getting married in a week. For Jack's last bachelor fling, best man Miles has arranged for them to take a week's trip to visit wineries and play golf.

Jack is a pleasure-seeker, a simple guy who is open to life and set on having as much sex as he can before he settles down with his beautiful Armenian bride. He's not an intellectual.

Miles is a wine connoisseur. When he describes wine or says what he loves about wine or speaks of its aroma, color or taste of wine as he swirls a wine glass, he is transformed from his crabby nebbish persona. Miles loves a good Pinot noir, but it's a difficult wine to get right. Miles reveals himself when he talks about the wine's characteristics.

Jack is a more eclectic wine drinker — loves merlot but has no idea what Miles is talking about when he rhapsodizes over a special vintage Pinot. Jack just opens the bottle, pours and drinks, but he is a television actor. And as the vacation includes going through lots of bottles, he picks up the wine lingo and tasting techniques. He also picks up every willing, attractive woman they meet. He urges Miles, ever reluctant to commit, to do the same.

Then one night Jack persuades tasting room pourer, Stephanie (Sandra Oh), and her wine-loving friend, Maya (Virginia Madsen), to join them. Stephanie is a gorgeous single mother, sexy and playful. Maya is a smart,

good looking waitress at the Hitching Post, one of Miles's regular stops in wine country. Stephanie and Jack catch fire, while Maya and Miles quaff wine and talk. Sex is played mostly for comic effect and at least once rather crudely. In contrast, tender love scenes

power of his appetites.

The demands of friendship are as real and complicated as in any other relationship. Contrary as an old married couple, these former freshman roommates know things about each other they have not wanted to recall.

MERIE W. WALLACE, TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX, 2004.

... WE MAY ASK OURSELVES:

What do I want in my life? A promising career? A healthy love relationship? Parenthood? The perfect Pinot?

are bathed in warm colors and soft lights. The story unfolds from the two couples' first night forward.

Filmmaker Alexander Payne (*Election*, *Citizen Ruth*, *About Schmidt*) and co-writer Jim Taylor (same films) have created a winning pair of near-opposites in Miles and Jack. Giamatti makes Miles a man who may succeed in love despite himself, while Church endows lovable rascal Jack with a hedonist's true belief in the

Recognizing their differences initially puts Miles in a snit, but eventually leads him to soul-searching and self-discovery. Jack indulges in every whim, no matter how dumb, then seeks help and vows repentance.

Like Payne and Taylor's other films, *Sideways* is also about the modern muddle most middle-agers struggle to make sense of. To paraphrase a famous David Byrne and Talking Heads song, we may ask ourselves: What do I want in my life? A promising career? A healthy love relationship? Parenthood? The perfect Pinot?

These are not trivial questions. But Jack and Miles (like Payne and Taylor) don't find such introspection easy. Like most of us, they fill up their days and nights, staying too busy to ask such questions. If the movie presents a partial answer it's that friendship isn't risk-free. Maybe that's a good place — even a great place — to begin.

Sideways opens at the Bijou Friday, Nov. 19 with my very highest recommendations. **EW**

Gaffe Queen

Larger embarrassments

BRIDGET JONES THE EDGE OF REASON: Directed by Beeban Kidron. Written by Andrew Davies, Helen Fielding, Richard Curtis, Adam Brooks. Produced by Tim Bevan, Eric Pellner, Jonathan Cavendish. Executive producers, Debra Hayward, Liza Chasin. Cinematography, Adrian Biddle. Editor, Greg Hayden. Production design, Gemma Jackson. Music by Harry Gregson-Williams. Costumes, Jany Temime. Starring Renée Zellweger, Colin Firth and Hugh Grant, with Jacinda Barrett, Jim Broadbent, Gemma Jones, Sally Phillips, Shirley Henderson, James Callis, Jessica Stevenson and Neil Pearson. Universal Pictures, 2004. R. 108 minutes.

If it's true too many cooks spoil the broth, look no further for that "off" taste than director Beeban Kidron (*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*) and the quartet of writers who created this disappointing sequel, based on Helen Fielding's less than fabulous followup novel.

Andrew Davies, Helen Fielding and Richard Curtis were the writing team for the charming, original *Bridget Jones' Diary*, but this time nothing works for them. Adam Brooks (*Wimbledon*) came in but didn't improve the flavor. Let's imagine everyone added a little something to the pot and spread the blame.

While the first movie loved Bridget despite or because of her failings, the sequel attempts to show what a cow she is by displaying her overweight body in the worst possible light. Every pound is up there on the big screen, and it isn't pretty. Her face is sweaty and blotchy. This movie is not a labor of love.

And actually, that pisses me off.

A mere six weeks after *Bridget Jones' Diary* left her standing in the middle of a London street during a big snowfall, locked in a divine clinch with Mr. [Mark] Darcy (Colin Firth, who had just delivered a series of major blows to Daniel Cleaver's (Hugh Grant) massive ego, Bridget (Renée Zellweger) is a mess.

Love-dazzled by her ongoing relationship with Mark, Bridget vacillates between comforting urges and unforgiving fears. She eats, feels too fat, smokes, tries to quit, drinks. Same old. Her television journalism has turned out to be a series of even cheaper cheap stunts. Her endearing trait of saying the wrong thing in public has stopped being funny and now is embarrassing. Likewise, the foibles of Bridget's mom (Gemma Jones) and father (Jim Broadbent) feel weird, and her pals have turned into snide "friends."

So when Bridget meets Mark's new assistant, Rebecca (Jacinda Barrett), a leggy, slender, dark-haired beauty, Bridget's body-image whiplash turns seriously

neurotic. At about the same time, Cleaver (Grant) re-enters Bridget's life. He's now producing a self-absorbed television travel program called "The Smooth Guide," and he wants Bridget to join his team.

I've always been a sucker for serials. If I like a character, I enjoy seeing him or her more than once on the screen or on the page. It's one of the reasons I loved "Sex and the City" all those years. I liked those dirty-talking women. And I still watch "ER." I don't miss an episode of "The West Wing," which got me through W's first cock-up as president. Defined, unique characters are a large part of why Tolkien's epic story is so compelling. We want to see how the characters change over time, learn from life. Or don't.

Unfortunately, Bridget's creators have decided she is a slow learner. We easily tire of her shenanigans and her seeming desire to spoil everything with Mark because she is too immature to trust him and too insecure to believe him. Soon enough the plot goes haywire, taking Bridget to exotic destinations, where she gets into real trouble.

It should be obvious that how to make a successful screen sequel is not a matter of repeating old tricks but of bringing in a creative team who can re-imagine the main character in new ways. Look how Spidey changes for *Spider Man 2*. Same good guy, new challenges from outside and inside. It's too bad no one loved Bridget enough to give her a worthy second chance.

There are still funny moments in *Edge of Reason*, including a juicy water fight between Darcy and Cleaver. But good scenes for Bridget are few. *Bridget Jones 2* is now playing at Cinemark and at Cinema World. Diehard fans may love it. **EW**



Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) is in trouble again.

UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 2004.