

## Film

# Homage to Catalonia

## Woody Allen in Barcelona

BY RICHARD A. BLAKE

**V**ICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA, Woody Allen's delightful new romantic comedy, reminds me of a platter of tapas. The master chef takes familiar ingredients, adds a few new spices, devises several clever combinations of flavors, alters the presentation a bit and creates something that appears innovative but also fulfills the diner's expectation of the recognizable. Olé! Comfort food with a zing. Old Chef Woody is up to new tricks. Also, tapas are light, merely adding to the enjoyment of

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the wine; by themselves they don't provide a satisfying full meal. This film brings its own kind of light satisfaction. It is breezy yet thoughtful, but without the bulk of, say, "Crimes and Misdemeanors" or "Manhattan."

Heading south, far from his usual claustrophobic caverns of New York or London, Allen creates a fresh look for his film in the sun-bathed streets and lush gardens of the Mediterranean. The camera of Javier Aguirresarobe lovingly caresses golden architecture, lush foliage and open skies. This does not look like a Woody Allen film. Nor does it sound like one. The music has an appropriately Latin sound, rather than the characteristic Dixieland renditions of Gershwin and

Porter. The script also contains fewer of those quotable one-liners than we might expect. This time comedy flows more from character than from language. Allen has often used an off-camera narrator to fill in the back story or comment on the action, and most frequently he reads the script himself. The unmistakable voice adds its own flavor to the text. In this film, Christopher Evan Welch reads the lines, but never appears on screen. The perfectly neutral voice eliminates the need for expository scenes to fill in background, provides smooth transitions and fills in details nicely, without making us think of Woody Allen.

For the most part the cast consists of newcomers to Planet Woody. Scarlett Johansson is the veteran; she also appeared in Allen's "Match Point" and "Scoop." Allen and his longtime casting director, Juliet Taylor, have chosen the actors with uncanny skill. Their choices make the film far more successful than it should be.

The physical appearance of the actors actually reveals a tremendous amount about the inner workings of the charac-



Javier Bardem and Rebecca Hall in a scene from the movie "Vicky Cristina Barcelona."

PHOTO: CNS/MGM

ters. As the sensuously beautiful Cristina, Scarlett Johansson looks unsettled and vulnerable. With her height and sharp features, Rebecca Hall, as Vicky, uses the cool appearance of an aspiring academic to mask inner panic at the uncertainty of her life. Javier Bardem, fresh from his Academy Award as the psychopathic killer in “No Country for Old Men,” blends the same sense of menace into the romantic lead, an artist named Juan Antonio. Penélope Cruz, as Maria Elena, Juan Antonio’s estranged wife, has the wiry figure, burning eyes and ample mane of wild black hair to suggest the turmoil of her inner life. (As their marriage burst apart at the seams, it’s not clear who tried to murder whom.) Patricia Clarkson, as Judy Nash, the “older woman,” has the thin lips, tightly combed straight hair and nervous gestures that suggest years of suppressed frustration. These five actors could appear in a set of still photographs, and one could devise a plausible plot for a film script.

The splendidly conceived personalities wrestle with the same existential questions and suffer from the same neuroses that Allen’s Manhattan-based characters have for the past 40 years. As the story opens, best friends Vicky and Cristina have just arrived in Barcelona to spend a summer as the guests of family friends, Mark (Kevin Dunn) and Judy Nash. Vicky will do research on her master’s thesis on Catalan culture. Her dedication or skill may be questionable, since even at this point in the project, her Spanish remains less than rudimentary. No crisis, however. She is engaged to Doug (Chris Messina) a wealthy up-and-coming attorney, who looks as though he just stepped out of a Lands’ End catalogue. She will be taken care of, master’s or not. If Vicky cannot see it, we can: 10 years of marriage to Doug will turn her into Judy. She compares security to freedom and cannot decide what she wants.

### Complex Love Triangle

Cristina, however, has few doubts. After college she spent three years making a 12-minute film on the various phases of love, but she isn’t sure about becoming a filmmaker. She comes to Barcelona for adventure, for the art and for the opportunity to “find herself.” At an art gallery both women become fascinated by Juan

Antonio, a local artist, with heavy lids, full lips and a three-day beard. They exchange glances with him. Later that night, at a restaurant, Juan Antonio comes to their table, and without bothering with small talk, abruptly invites them to spend a weekend with him in Oviedo, on the northern coast. They will enjoy the scenery, the art, the wine and, of course, the sex. Vicky finds the proposition crass, but Cristina finds it intriguing. Vicky agrees to go along for the art, but she remains adamant about the rest of it, insisting on separate rooms. Cristina harbors no such inhibitions. As it turns out, however, fate intervenes, and Vicky succumbs to his charms before Cristina.

Before this triangle can sort itself out, Doug arrives from New York with a grand scheme of having a romantic wedding in Spain before a church wedding for their friends back home. He has been so busy making money that this may be the first romantic or impulsive thought he has ever had in his life. Vicky must choose between Juan Antonio and Doug; between the Dionysian and the dull. As she tries to think through her dilemma, she happens upon Judy in a compromising situation. Humiliated, Judy tries to explain to Vicky how miserable her life with Mark has been. Her therapist asks why she has not left her husband, and she admits that she is too afraid to go. Vicky sees her own life through the prism of Judy’s.

While Vicky dithers, Cristina renews her pursuit of adventure and moves into Juan Antonio’s studio. While one triangle seems to have resolved itself, another develops. Maria Elena, fresh from her latest suicide attempt, returns to Juan Antonio; the three share the studio, and the women share Juan Antonio. Despite this arrangement, the two women eventually become close friends. The three seem to inspire one another in their artistic work, and Cristina discovers that she may actually have talent after all.

### In an Amoral Universe

All these erotic shenanigans actually make a profoundly moral point in this PG-13 rated film. Throughout his career, Allen has examined the emptiness of urban life. Without any recognizable belief in a God, or as he puts it “a moral structure to the universe,” he shows his characters in pursuit of meaning in the ephemeral. He finds

the quest of the modern urbanite both poignant and, at the same time, terribly funny in its inevitable futility. Their love affairs are fleeting and ultimately empty, but with nothing else to reach for, his characters cherish the momentary joy they bring to life. In his seduction speech in the restaurant, Juan Antonio persuades Vicky and Cristina with a summary statement of Allen’s grim view of the world: Why hesitate if there is no morality? The artist creates his own moral universe.

Most of Allen’s New York characters dwell on the fringes of the literary and academic worlds. They are writers of undemonstrated talent who can’t quite finish their novel and can’t quite admit that they may be deceiving themselves. In their insecurity, they twitch and stammer, like the character Allen plays so often himself. Juan Antonio’s self-possession and clarity of vision make him doubly menacing to the women in his life. He speaks and paints without hesitation or self-doubt. Vicky and Cristina feel inadequate in his presence. Judy admires him from a distance. He keeps Maria Elena teetering on the edge of madness. His art represents the ideal they can never achieve.

In this film, language provides another clue to Allen’s sense of alienation. None of the Americans speak Spanish with any fluency. Juan Antonio and Maria Elena both speak English, but in moments of passion they revert to Spanish, thus excluding Cristina and Vicky from their more intimate exchanges. Juan Antonio’s father is a great poet, but he will not publish his poems. He keeps his thoughts to himself. Doug and Vicky repeatedly try to use cellphones that do not work. At every turn, these people cannot or will not communicate. When Doug and Mark make small talk about a mutual business associate in New York, the inanity of their exchange seems to build a wall between them. In their convivial chatter, they make language a defensive weapon.

Don’t listen to their annoying blather. Sit back and enjoy the tapas, the wine and the conversation with Woody Allen. You’ll feel refreshed, but not stuffed. **A**



Two theology students review “The Dark Knight,” at [americamagazine.org/connects](http://americamagazine.org/connects).

