

ARTS

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Natalie Portman's performance as a nervy gambler in 'My Blueberry Nights' is enchanting; she brings a bit of a genius to an otherwise disappointing film

The tale of the raffish cafe owner



My Blueberry Nights
12A CERT, 111 MINS

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Wong Kar Wai is one of those directors whose name is well known by film buffs and banded around at film festivals as a badge of authenticity, but few could really tell you why. He has something to do with Hong Kong film noir and something to do with an arty film called 2046 which was at Cannes a couple of years ago – anyway, he's marvellous.

So I was looking forward to *My Blueberry Nights*, his first English-language film, boasting a very grand array of names, each of them, I suppose, looking to be touched by Credibility Himself. Jude Law, Natalie Portman, Rachel Weisz, David Strathairn and jazz songstress Norah Jones intriguingly cast in the leading role. I settled back in my seat and prepared to soak in pure, unalloyed genius.

Dear reader, the opening scene... what words can I find? A toe-curling catastrophe? No, worse than that, somehow, because it was so nearly intelligent, so painfully effortful, so cringingly sincere. We are introduced to Jude Law's character, Jeremy, a raffish northern Brit who has some- how, charmingly, managed to end up running a cafe in New York's meat-packing district. Clearly, he loves his job. As he begins discussing love and life with teary customer Elizabeth (Norah Jones), his analogies all come from cafe life. It is like the lost Canterbury tale from the Chaucer canon: "The Tale of the Raffish Cafe Owner". Relationships are like "peach cobbler"; he can deduce everything from the food choices of his customers; he collects their forgotten keys and tells cute, profound stories about each of them; and love, you guessed it, is just like blueberry pie. The whole thing sounds like it's a bad translation from another language – and given that Wong Kar Wai wrote the script, I suspect that is what has happened. It falls flat. It totally misses the mark.

The film limps along in this vein for the next hour or so. Elizabeth goes on a road trip to find herself, changing her name at each new town, and running into larger-than-life characters whom she observes quietly. Rachel Weisz plays sexy, over-the-top Sue, estranged wife of Arnie (David

Strathairn), a depressive drunk. There are occasional flashes of life but mostly the set-piece scenes continue with cod philosophy and bon mots. There is no interest in the detail of these characters; they are ciphers, stock figures, only included to prove a point.

Law, Weisz and Strathairn are each accomplished actors, and you can see them working hard to make something memorable out of this mostly silly

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script, but Norah Jones should stick to singing. With an impassive, near-expressionless face, Jones's character is a hole at the centre of this story. Quite possibly the film could have been different had a professional done it instead.

Even the legendary Wong Kar Wai artwork managed to seem laboured. The film is shot on gritty digital, and there are certainly some shots which surprise and uplift (such as a fisheye

lense shot through the CCTV camera of Jeremy's cafe while he is fighting with a customer). But mostly all that slow panning past partially obstructing objects, all those extreme close-ups, just seemed rather try-hard. At times it felt like the "best in class" project of an undergraduate film school.

And then, suddenly, there is Natalie Portman. The 10-minute vignette, towards the end of Elizabeth's journey, in which she comes across Portman's character Leslie are by far and away the best 10 minutes in the film. She plays a rebel gambler in Las Vegas, brought up as a poker player by her father. She is vigorous, nervy, statuesque and generally enchanting. She borrows \$6,000 off Elizabeth and tries to steal it, but they become friends. Even Jones seems to come to life in her presence. It is great cinema.

Had the director not pulled this rabbit out of the hat, I would have left the cinema mystified as to what all the fuss was about. As it is I was disappointed, but I have to concede that within the 111 minutes of *My Blueberry Nights*, there is, after all, a work of genius. To borrow one of Jeremy's favourite metaphors, there is a cherry hidden within this sloggy, overcooked tartine. It is a 10-minute short film starring Natalie Portman and Norah Jones, set in Vegas; if only the director had spotted it and spent less time on all the surrounding puff pastry.

Funny things that some people call art



ART REVIEW
Milo Andreas Wagner

Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia

TATE MODERN, UNTIL MAY 26

No discussion of Marcel Duchamp, or of conceptual art in general, can proceed without mention of his seminal *Fountain*. It is quite ubiquitous, and if you haven't seen it in a gallery you've probably seen a photograph of it (or at least one of the authorised replicas: the original was lost shortly after its first exhibition, apparently smashed by workmen who didn't realise it was art).

In case you haven't, I will reveal that *Fountain* is not a fountain at all: it is an up-ended urinal. What's more, in 2004 it was named the most influential artwork of the 20th century by a panel of 500 critics, to the bewilderment and apoplexy of many. The classic question, raised again by the heavily publicised *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia*, is: does conceptual art deserve to be called "art"?

The critic Brian Sewell once characterised conceptual art as "funny things that funny people do": he was exactly right. Duchamp simply purchased a urinal, set it on its back, signed it and called it art. Brilliant!

In defence of *Fountain*, Beatrice Wood once wrote: "If the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges." (That was back in 1917, and little, in my view, has changed.) But though well intentioned, her remarks rather miss Duchamp's point, which wasn't aesthetic at all. The meaning of this work might be tricky to pin down, but its purpose is clear: to focus attention away from physical craft, and toward the act of interpretation. By the removal of the visual element, we are encouraged to think rather than look. Jonathan Jones, writing in the *Guardian* earlier this month, called it "bizarely lovely". It isn't a toilet.

For a more precise explanation of this so-called "ready-made" art, conceptualist critics tell us we must look to a Greek word, *achetropoi-ctoi*, which apparently means "an image not shaped by the hand of an artist" – a perfect example of modern art critics invoking classical languages to give themselves an air of credibility. It's a term that seems to me to describe, fairly precisely, everything that is unconvincingly not art.

Fortunately this exhibition is broader in scope than Duchamp's brainless and banal luo; his partner in crime, Emmanuel Radnitsky,

better known as Man Ray, is well represented. But sadly it's Radnitsky's trite maxims, and not his work, that most entertain: "When I saw I was under attack from all sides," he once wrote, "I knew I was on the right track." Cute words, but ultimately vacuous. And that's the problem with Duchamp and Man Ray: there's just no artistic substance to any of it.

Francis Picabia is less well known than Duchamp or Man Ray, but it was Picabia's work I found myself returning to. Picabia was an extraordinary individual. In his 70-old years he mastered every fad and fashion the art world could come up with. What's more, he simply adored paint. In response to his grandfather's urging to become a photographer (the old man believed colour photography spelt the end of painting), Picabia responded: "You can photograph a landscape, but not the forms I have in my head." It was this attachment at once to the physical and to the imaginary that was to define his career, and give rise to his most recognisable images: representation-abstract hybrids of man and machine; upturned artwork of the 20th century by a panel of 500 critics, to the bewilderment and apoplexy of many. The classic question, raised again by the heavily publicised *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia*, is: does conceptual art deserve to be called "art"?

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A dazzling double act

THEATRE REVIEW
Speed the Plow
OLD VIC, LONDON

Kevin Spacey and Jeff Goldblum appear like a couple of knock-out vaudevillians at the start of David Mamet's *Speed the Plow*. They obviously love it, wisecracking and nudging their way through a marvellous routine. They are characters in Mamet's dynamic, cynical but relatively uncomplicated early play about the grim realities of Hollywood.

Goldblum plays Bobby Gould, a recently appointed studio head of production. He is keen to outdo the rival studio "across the street", and he sees his chance when a script comes in from an extraordinary position. A blockbuster script about prison violence interests a leading director from the rival studio, who is prepared to cross the street to make the film for Fox and Gould.

Sensing that a jackpot, the two producers click their fingers, slap their thighs, high-five, shout and talk over each other with wild excitement, stopping only just short of breaking into a song and dance. This is enthusiasm born of avarice. As *Speed the Plow* progresses, we are reassured that the two producers are also chronically insecure, unconfident, bad natured, morally lost and

incapable of loyalty to anything except the business of making money. This is classic Mamet territory, examining ruthless ambition and the male work ethic. It is a play about how men behave in an un sentimental and unforgiving business, one in which they have convinced themselves they must survive, even if it requires abandoning their humanity.

Spacey's best scenes are those in which he attempts to convince a wavering Bobby Gould that a mistake in creative judgment will unquestionably mean professional and personal obliteration. He tries to stop Gould from abandoning the prison movie and investing instead in a Bergmansque script about man's loneliness in the face of imminent annihilation. A temporary secretary (Laura Michelle Kelly) has convinced Gould that he must change, largely through a long central section where idealistic claptrap masks a bedroom promise. In Fox's outrage at such a challenge to the order of things, the venality of Hollywood is overpowering. Mamet argues that the movie tycoon's ambition is always the obsession with making money, and a belief that one makes money through a brassy, straightforward and unsophisticated product.

Laura Michelle Kelly as Karen, the temporary secretary, is wonderfully confident in her murky, idealistic, worldly seduction scene. However, in all fairness, we are here to see the dazzling,

incomparable double act of Spacey and Goldblum. In a recently screened Bafta appearance, they wended if they were a reincarnation of the male work ethic. They may hate each other. More likely, in the tradition of great comedic partnerships, they are dependent on each other to fend off the wolves. Fox relies on Gould to make film money; Gould relies on Fox to keep him in touch with the cold reality of their business. These two men, with all their pre-show penance will still be on your lips by the time it all ends. However, it is worth it. The show is impossibly glamorous, and it is a treat to see the burlesque played at such a level, with such consummate skill. Mamet's cold-eyed sentiment may well put a few dreamy people off having a go at that long, promise-filled script. He will be doing them a favour. Hollywood bites!

Peter Shaw

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