

# Review: Vicky Cristina Barcelona

Submitted by Kimberly Gadette on Wed, 02/04/2009 - 15:25.



Woody's wild for Vicky and Cristina, two-timing his Manhattan for Barcelona, reckons **Kimberly Gadette**, but Oscar's only got eyes for Penelope.

Perennially hopeful, diehard Woody Allen fans rush to the movies each time the auteur releases a new romantic comedy, balancing their anticipation with a measure of self-protective doubt.

Can Woody pull off a commensurate *Annie Hall*, a *Manhattan*? Or the madcap plotting and wild characters of a *Bullets Over Broadway*, a *Broadway Danny Rose*? Though aficionados say they want something new, they also long for the best of the Alvy & Annie days when those two mismatched personalities fell for each other while a starry Manhattan skyline sparked in their eyes.

And there's the conundrum. We want the old Woody, balancing wit and sentimentality, piercing middle-class foibles with a tiny prick of a needle. Yet we also want something fresh, something inspiring. Certainly not a rehash of the past spoiled wanderings of the rich and aimless.

We may not be alone in our yearnings. With this movie's latest examination of dissatisfied love, perfectly framed by impossibly glorious Spanish locations, it looks like Woody also longs to recapture yesterday. He swaps the autumn leaves of Central Park for bougainvillea on a Barcelonian balcony. He replaces his earlier leading ladies, Diane Keaton and Mia Farrow, with the beautiful, pouty Scarlett Johansson (her third Allen film since 2005). But Ms. Johansson's ingénues don't possess the same rapier wit and self-knowledge of his past muses. And Rebecca Hall, well, she's no Annie Hall. Perhaps attempting to echo Keaton's earlier, ditsy brilliance, Allen literally splits his iconic leading lady in two: hence the tart-tongued Vicky and the scattered Cristina.



The harsh fact is that none of us can go home again to Woody's *Manhattan*. Three decades later, the New York skyline horribly altered, the economy in a freefall, we simply can't *Play It Again, Sam*. Though we still want to escape from our personal troubles, we need much more to divert us other than two self-entitled women, exemplars of youth and beauty, their problems no more taxing than whether to meet at the amusement park or the marina.

So when these lightweight lovers ramble through their individual midsummer night's dreams, knowing only what they don't want, their starry-eyed bliss ending after their first sexual capitulation – well, we just can't care all that much.

As the story goes, two American women (Johansson's Cristina and Hall's Vicky) are spending the summer at Vicky's relatives' house, a sumptuous home in Barcelona. While browsing through an art gallery, the women notice Mr Tall, Dark and Foreign (Javier Bardem's Juan Antonio). Once how-de-dos are exchanged, Juan Antonio invites the ladies to join him in a weekend jaunt to the cozy village of Oviedo. Cristina accepts while Vicky, sporting a rock of an engagement ring that looks like a miniature Gibraltar, is horrified. Objections aside, off they go.

Romantic entanglements ensue. It's all charming but fairly uneventful until about an hour into the film, when Juan Antonio's ex-wife (Cruz' Maria Elena) bursts onto the screen, finally creating a storm of conflict.



Thank heaven for Maria Elena. Where Vicky and Cristina are pallid, Cruz's ex-wife is ablaze with passion. Though the title reflects Juan Antonio's synchronous affections for Vicky, Cristina and Barcelona, Maria has no equal. Cruz effortlessly blends the drama with the comedy: her initial grilling of Cristina is one of the funniest scenes in the film. It's no wonder that Cruz has bewitched Oscar as easily as Juan Antonio.

As for less-appealing seductions, it seems that Woody has finally ceased his onscreen romancing of women who could pass for his granddaughters. He's even relegated his chummy narrator's voice to another, namely Christopher Evan Welch. Speaking of that pervasive Woody voice, it's odd to hear Hall's Vicky channeling Woody's inflections in the first few scenes, the familiar faux-annoyance tinged with a Hebraic sensibility. But once Vicky succumbs to self-pity, the inflection vanishes right along with a promising sense of humor. Winsome, lose some. Well, actually, lose more.

At the end of the día, the movie's a lovely, empty Spanish travelogue hosted by beautiful people. Per Mr. Allen's own musings on this film, "I have no profound things to say about love..." Gee, Mr. Allen, after all this time, honestly? Nothing at all?

**Rating on a scale of 5 Spanish Steps: 2.5**

**Release date:** UK: February 6, 2009,

**Directed by:** Woody Allen

**Written by:** Woody Allen

**Cast:** Javier Bardem, Penélope Cruz, Scarlett Johansson, Patricia Clarkson, Kevin Dunn, Rebecca Hall, Chris Messina

**Rating:** US: PG-13; UK: 12A

**Running time:** 96 minutes



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