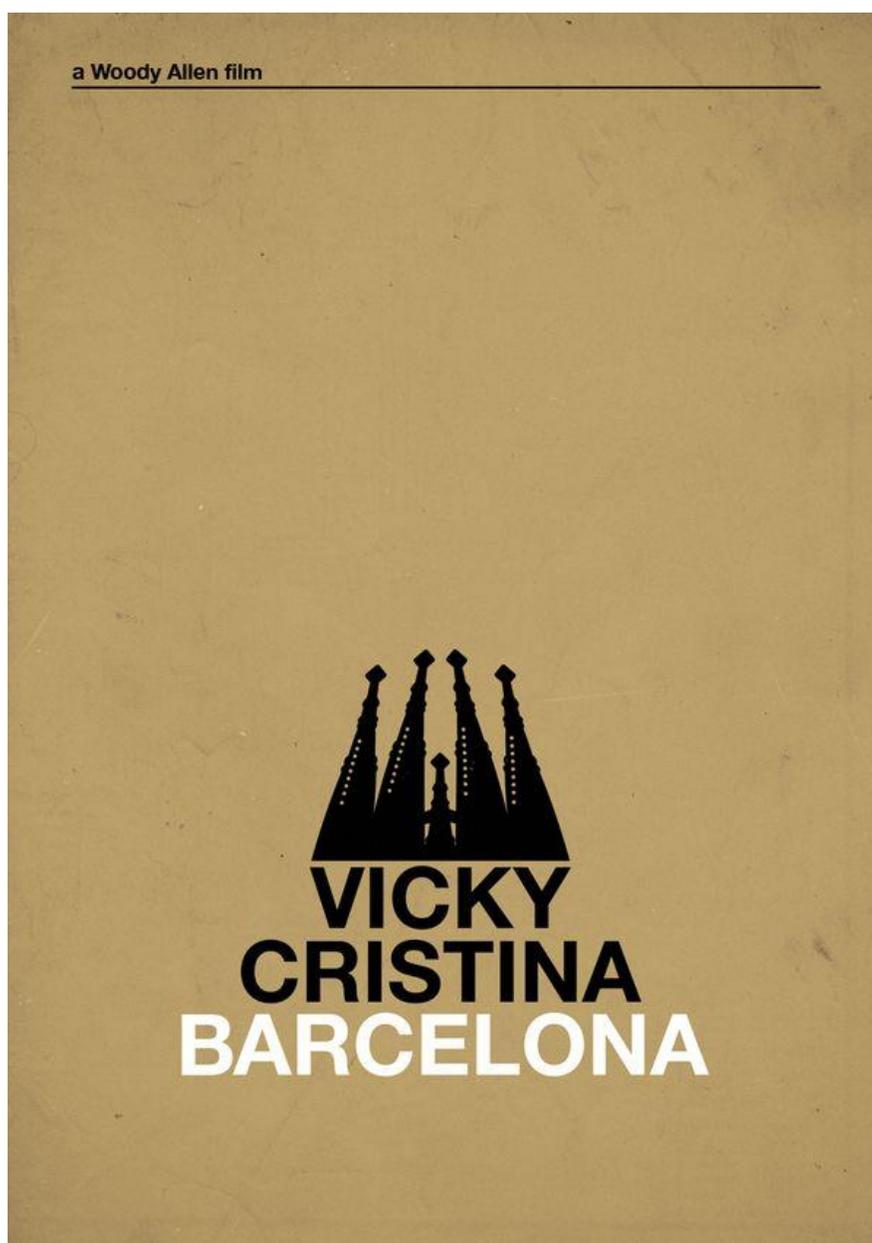


Vicki Cristina Barcelona



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Vicky Cristina Barcelona Directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Letty Aronson, James Roures, Stephen Tenenbaum & Gareth Wiley. Screenplay by Woody Allen. Line Producer: Bernat Elias. Production Design by Alain Bainée. Cinematography by Javier Aguirresarobe. Art Direction by Iñigo Navarro. Edited by Alisa Lepselter. Cinematic length: 97 minutes. Production Companies: Mediapro, The

Weinstein Company, Gravier Productions and Wild Bunch. Distributed by MGM in the USA. and Mediapro in Spain. Cinematic release August 2008: DVD release February 2012. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

Cast

Vicki: Rebecca Hall

Cristina: Scarlett Johansson

Juan Antonio Gonzales: Javier Bardem

Maria Elena: P nelope Cruz

Doug: Chris Messina

Judy Nash: Patricia Clarkson

Mark Nash: Kevin Dunn

Ben the student: Pablo Schreiber

Sally: Carrie Preston



Vicki left (Rebecca Hall) and Cristina right (Scarlett Johansson),

Review

Two American friends, Vicki (Rebecca Hall) and Cristina (Scarlett Johansson), go to Barcelona together for a summer holiday for different reasons. Vicki is studying for a master's degree in Catalan art. Cristina wants to find what she wants out of life. When their American hosts take them to an art exhibition Cristina notices a man in the distance wearing a red shirt. As in many Woody Allen films the complicated narratives develop out of the most trivial things. If he had worn a less conspicuous shirt... When she questions her hosts about who he is they tell her that he is the painter Juan Antonio Gonzales (Javier Badem) and that he stabbed his wife during a bitter divorce battle. Later while Vicki and Cristina are dining she sees him again and Vicki warns her not to keep looking his way or there will be trouble and that certainly happens. He comes over, introduces himself, asks their names and then suggests they form a sexual triad. He has a plane waiting, so within the hour they can fly to Oviedo for a weekend. Cristina likes the idea. Vicki says some predictable things, politely. She accompanies them to protect Cristina, she thinks, but when Cristina falls ill with food poisoning, there little tender administration gets delivered at Cristina's bedside.

As is usual in Woody Allen's twenty-first century films things are not what they superficially seem, indeed. There are always subconscious motivations, half-hidden desires, things not mentioned by the seemingly frank, lives lived in narratives different to the major one depicted on screen. These emerge after we think we know what is going on. This is no criticism of Allen's cinematic methods, far from it. This comes as a welcome change to the predictable standard Hollywood formula films: so is his approach to the world of free sexuality. Allen does not reveal naked bodies in this film which investigates sexual motivations and desires, how they unfold and their effects. His characters are without the sexual guilt evident in so much culture. Sanctimonious morality remains mercifully absent. Although there are negative consequences, the three women involved do not suffer destruction for their desires and the male appears as no lecherous villain. Juan politely and clearly gives the women choices and he has loyalty, generosity and manners. Xavier does not rampantly attempt to seduce Vicki; he discusses culture, takes her to meet his father, and shows her around Oviedo.

Vicki Cristina Barcelona gains depth by what the film implies, often with subtlety. If Vicki is so happy with her fiancé Doug why does he stay in New York while she goes to Barcelona for the summer? Why when he rings does she always

say she will call him back later? Why does she extol his virtues as if she is trying to convince herself? From his first scenes he appears as totally considerate, stable and reliable as she says. He also comes across as totally predictable, unadventurous, staid and bland. He also is unknowing, being the fifth point in a romantic pentangle that he does not know exists. Why does she say that she has come to Barcelona to study Catalan art in such a flat, unenthused way? She says she wants no involvement with Juan, so why dine with him and with her top unbuttoned to show her cleavage? Cristina and Juan are more obvious. She has trouble focusing her creative talent and has a way off going through life by experimentation, finding out what ultimately, she does not want. He seems to want sexual involvement as a painkiller for his failed marriage and cannot emotionally break with his intense, neurotic but beautiful wife (Penelope Cruz). When she turns up homeless and needing help after a suicide attempt she finds Juan living with Cristina, both of the women show obvious signs of jealousy. It seems obvious what will happen next, but fortunately the film does not go that predictable way: the characters go into happy directions – for a time.



Juan eventually finds himself in a triad but not the one he expected.

Allen's film does not end as a comedy. Riches and intelligence do not create happiness.

Problems come not from jealousy, artistic failure or financial insecurity, but because one person cannot relax into even a Bohemian triad routine, but must always have a new sensation, disliking after a time what they once liked. With the other four in the romantic pentangle one will be obviously happy with their career entanglements, two others will be locked into their war with each other and the fifth will probably have a wealthy life devoid of sensuality, excitement or deep love.



Penelope Cruz as Maria Elena. This still shows the character's beauty and her tempestuous, suspicious character. Cruz won the Academy award for best supporting actress. Javier Badem, her on screen and real life husband, won the best supporting actor award for This is No Country For Old Men. Both were well deserved.

Original, well-acted and well-written, beautifully photographed with memorable settings, *Vicki Cristina Barcelona* deserved the critical and popular acclaim that it got.

One caveat does emerge: Woody Allen focuses on the upper middle class: this means that nobody has to struggle or even worry about money. They can focus on other things; *La Dolce Vita* – the sweet life, Catalan style, nearly fifty years after Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* started the trend in cinema and over a hundred after Henry James and Edith Wharton started examining the lives of wealthy American expatriates in Europe.

Allen depicts Barcelona as the Catalan tourist board would love to see it depicted. Yes the good things shown here are there indeed, but the many homeless street people and the street gangs, the pollution, frequent acid rain, the litter in many streets, the cramped, ugly modern identikit units housing the majority of Barcelona's population who live lives of quiet desperation - none of these, so obvious in the real Barcelona, are depicted. This is not saying that Allen's film should focus on the dreary, but viewers of his films should be aware that his focus goes to a small, unrepresentative, hermetically sealed, self-absorbed group.

Javier Bardem Patricia Clarkson Penélope Cruz
Kevin Dunn Rebecca Hall Scarlett Johansson Chris Messina

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