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MOVIE REVIEW

Synecdoche, New York

NYT Critics' Pick



Abbot Gensler/Sony Pictures Classics

From left, Emily Watson, Samantha Morton, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Tom Noonan in "Synecdoche, New York."

Dreamer, Live in the Here and Now

By MANOHLA DARGIS

Published: October 24, 2008

To say that Charlie Kaufman's "Synecdoche, New York" is one of the best films of the year or even one closest to my heart is such a pathetic response to its soaring ambition that I might as well pack it in right now. That at least would be an appropriate response to a film about failure, about the struggle to make your mark in a world filled with people who are more gifted, beautiful, glamorous and desirable than the rest of us — we who are crippled by narcissistic inadequacy, yes, of course, but also by real horror, by zits, flab and the cancer that we know (we know!) is eating away at us and leaving us no choice but to lie down and die.

Yet since this is a review of a new Charlie Kaufman work, perhaps I should hit rewind: "Synecdoche, New York" is the first film directed by the writer of such unlikely Hollywood entertainments as "Being John Malkovich," "Adaptation" and "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," a romance of such delicate feeling that it's still a shock that it carries a studio brand. Mr. Kaufman's kinked, playful screenplays are usually accompanied by a flurry of "e" adjectives: eclectic, eccentric, edgy, eggheady. (Also: quirky.) That's true only if you consider the contemporary American screen, with its talking Chihuahuas and adult male babies with mother fixations.

Come to think of it, the main character in “Synecdoche” has a thing about poop and bosomy women, though happily not at the same time.

To continue, despite my agonizing self-consciousness: “Synecdoche” is the story of a theater director, Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman, exhaling despair with every breath), miserably married to a talented painter, Adele Lack (Catherine Keener). The two live in Schenectady, N.Y., with their 4-year-old, Olive (Sadie Goldstein), who, when the story opens, is casually evacuating radioactive-green feces. Neither Caden nor Adele is alarmed, so intensely are they wrapped up in a depressive melancholia they seem to have nurtured longer than their daughter. Even couples therapy (with Hope Davis, in a dazzling brief turn) brings out the worst in them. “Can I say something awful?,” Adele asks (as if she needed permission), before confessing that she fantasized Caden dying. Which made her happy.

Caden lives with Adele and Olive in a “fragile-seeming home,” which is true even if those particular words were written by Arthur Miller, who uses them to describe Willy Loman’s home. As it happens, Caden is directing “Death of a Salesman,” but with a twist: the actors (including Michelle Williams), are all young. The tragedy of the play, explains Caden, will emerge from the casting: the audience will see the young actors and know that, in time, they will end up every bit as crushed as Willy. In “Salesman,” Miller writes that an air of the dream clings to Willy’s home, “a dream rising out of reality.” Mr. Kaufman doesn’t directly quote these words, yet they hover over the film nonetheless.

“Salesman” is a smash, but everything else falls to smithereens. Adele, who smirks through the play and asks Caden why he’s wasting himself on other people’s work, takes Olive to Berlin for a show that will make the painter a star. Caden stays behind, worrying the sores that have sprouted on his body and watching a pharmaceutical commercial in which he appears to play a part. Is he delusional? Dreaming? Before you have time to reach for Freud’s “Interpretation of Dreams,” he wins a MacArthur Award, a so-called genius grant, and begins work on a monumental theater production. I want, he tells his therapist with baleful sincerity, to create something “big and true and tough. You know, finally put my real self into something.”

He succeeds in doing the first (the big, the true, the tough); it’s the self part that proves trickier. Among many, many other things, “Synecdoche, New York” is about authenticity, including the search for an authentic self in an inauthentic world. For Caden, creating something that will justify the genius award, which will quiet Adele’s mocking criticism and his own restless doubt, becomes all-consuming. Inside a

fantastically, impossibly enormous warehouse, he begins rehearsing with dozens and then hundreds, thousands, of actors, directing them in separate lifelike vignettes. Ms. Williams's Claire, the adoring young woman who earlier played Willy Loman's wife, joins the new cast and soon marries Caden, Adele having abandoned that role. ("I'm famous!" Adele blurts out to Caden on the phone from Berlin before hanging up.)

There's more — including Samantha Morton as Hazel, Caden's sweetest of sweethearts — so much more that you would need to recreate the film in its entirety to get it all in, which is precisely Caden's own tactic. Inside the warehouse, he builds a replica of his world line by line, actor by actor, until fiction and nonfiction blur. Like the full-scale map in Borges's short story "On Exactitude in Science," the representation takes on the dimensions of reality to the point of replacing it. The French theorist Jean Baudrillard uses Borges's story as a metaphor for his notion of the simulacrum, which probably explains why Caden, who has trouble naming things, considers titling his production "Simulacrum." I don't even know what that means, sighs Hazel.

You may giggle knowingly at that line, but the poignancy of this exchange is that Caden, who is so busy creating one world that he forgets to live in another, doesn't seem to really understand what it means either. Mr. Kaufman rarely stops to explain himself, but like that simulacrum aside, he continually hints at what he's up to, where he's going and why. (Even Caden's last name is a clue as to what ails him.) Mr. Kaufman is serious about seriousness, but he's also serious about being funny, so he drops heavy weight (Kafka, Dostoyevsky) lightly, at times comically, and keeps the jokes, wordplay and sight gags coming amid the on- and offstage dramas, divorces, births, calamities, the fear and the sickness and the trembling.

Despite its slippery way with time and space and narrative and Mr. Kaufman's controlled grasp of the medium, "Synecdoche, New York" is as much a cry from the heart as it is an assertion of creative consciousness. It's extravagantly conceptual but also tethered to the here and now, which is why, for all its flights of fancy, worlds within worlds and agonies upon agonies, it comes down hard for living in the world with real, breathing, embracing bodies pressed against other bodies. To be here now, alive in the world as it is rather than as we imagine it to be, seems a terribly simple idea, yet it's also the only idea worth the fuss, the anxiety of influence and all the messy rest, a lesson hard won for Caden. Life is a dream, but only for sleepers.

See the review online at:

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/10/24/movies/24syne.html?8dpc#>

Los Angeles Times

Review: 'Synecdoche, New York'

Charlie Kaufman creates a world where futility fights to coexist with function.
By CARINA CHOCANO
Movie Critic

October 24, 2008

"Synecdoche, New York," screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's wildly ambitious directorial debut, recalls the Jorge Luis Borges story in which the imperial cartographers make a map of the empire so detailed and true-to-life that it takes on the exact dimensions of the territory and ends up covering it entirely. Jean Baudrillard famously inverted the story to illustrate his idea about the "precession of simulacra," a postmodern condition in which the representation of something comes before the thing it represents, breaking down the distinction between representation and reality completely.

No doubt Kaufman, the brilliant, melancholy and unrepentantly solipsistic mind behind "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" and "Adaptation," had both in mind when he outlined the contours of his sprawling, awe-inspiring, heartbreaking, frustrating, hard-to-follow and aching, aching sad movie, which might have just as well have been called "Being Charlie Kaufman" or, better yet, "Being Anybody."

But "Synecdoche, New York" is beautiful, and I don't just mean the title. A synecdoche, for those unversed in the poetic tropes, is a figure of speech by which a part stands in for the whole, or the whole stands in for a part, or the general stands in for the specific, or vice versa. It's a lilting play on the name of the town of Schenectady, N.Y., where the movie's hero, a melancholy regional theater director named Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman), lives with his painter wife, Adele (Catherine Keener), and their 4-year-old daughter, Olive (Sadie Goldstein). It hints at the artistic and existential obsessions that come to stand in for the life of an unhappy artist who blankets his life with his work, struggles mightily to understand the first by way of the second, and loses an ability to distinguish between the two. And it makes an irrefutable case for the universality of the individual human experience.

Until Adele, who is fed up with Caden's depressive tendencies, announces she's going to her gallery show in Berlin without Caden and with Olive, the movie adheres more or less to the conventions of realism. (There are, however, plenty of clues that this is a fallacy: The radio announcing the first day of fall while the newspaper says it's Halloween, the weekly magazine review that appears on the morning after a play opens, the bizarre TV cartoon featuring an existential hero who looks like Caden, and the plague of ailments that afflict him all at once.) But once Adele and Olive decamp for Germany, any vestige of realism flies out the window. Time collapses. A week later, a year has gone by. The membranes that keep his interior and exterior worlds separate dissolve.

Caden becomes romantically (though platonically) involved with Hazel (Samantha Morton), the flirtatious girl who works at the box office of a theater company where he's mounting an untraditional production of "Death of a Salesman," not long after she buys a house that's permanently on fire. The relationship fails, he wins a MacArthur "genius" grant, moves to New York, rents a warehouse the size of a dirigible hangar and begins to mount a theatrical production so "real" and "true" it will somehow capture every nuance and paradox of life. "This is a play about dating," he tells Hazel. "It's a play about death. Birth. Life. Family. It's about everything."

While Adele's pinpoint specificity (she paints portraits of the women she loves, and they are so

minuscule they must be viewed through jeweler's glasses) makes her an instant star, Caden's inchoate ambition to express everything in the world at once sends him scurrying down an infinite network of rabbit holes. The set is perpetually added on to and struck. None of it gets him any closer to expressing his inner life, none of it shows any sign of stopping.

He casts an actress named Claire (Michelle Williams) to play Hazel as the box-office girl, then marries her, then recasts her as herself, then hires the real Hazel to be his assistant, then casts another actress (Emily Watson) to play Hazel in her new role. Late in the film, the mysterious man (Tom Noonan) who has been following him throughout the movie shows up at a casting call and announces he wants to play him. He knows Caden, understands him, knows him better than Caden knows himself, can explain him to him.

What is going on with Caden? Is he sick? Crazy? Dying? Already dead? Pretty much all of the above, though not in the usual sense. Kaufman is trying to do what Caden is trying to do; he's trying to make sense of loss, longing and death. He's mining all the sadness in the world. As for happiness, he's suspicious. It's a sham product sold by a huckster (Hope Davis, as his therapist and bestselling self-help author). He's marveling at the struggle and the longing, multiplied by the billions, in the face of futility. He's having an existential freakout on an epic scale.

Hoffman commits himself completely to Caden's mournfulness, to the sadness that comes with realizing, as he does in the end, as what was once "an exciting, mysterious future" recedes into the past, "that this is everyone's experience, every single one; that you are not special; that there is no one watching you and there never was." This sounds hopeless -- too hopeless, even, for some of the characters in the film, who chafe at Caden's vision. There's beauty everywhere -- in the transporting score by Jon Brion, in Hoffman and Morton's performances, in Adele's paintings (actually the miniaturized paintings of an artist named Alex Kanevsky), in the fact that we struggle in the face of futility, that as Caden tells his actors, we simultaneously fear and don't believe in death. That the house is on fire from the day you buy it. That the house is never not on fire.

See the review online at:

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/reviews/la-et-synecdoche24-2008oct24,0,411816.story>

TIME

Synecdoche: Charlie Kaufman's Dangerous Mind

By [RICHARD CORLISS](#) – TIME MAGAZINE
Thursday, Oct. 23, 2008



The very title *Synecdoche, New York* is off-putting. Like a genius lunatic wandering the streets, it seems to scream, "I'm weird and difficult! Stay away!" But I say, it's weird and wonderful. Go!

[Charlie Kaufman](#) you know as the gifted, mulish, effulgently idiosyncratic screenwriter — one of the few non-directors to establish a unique film voice — of *Being John Malkovich*, *Human Nature*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The typical film scribe making his move to the director's chair would pick a modest project, one that doesn't tax his tyro status. But Kaufman's first work as a total auteur is his most daunting project yet: a portrait of a creative mind in artistic and emotional crisis, painted as a vast mural that encompasses 30-plus years, slips from mundane reality into nightmare fantasy, and is set (not counting side trips to Germany) in two New York State river cities 150 miles apart.

The first is Schenectady, the working-class city near Albany where Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a theater director, lives with his artist wife Adele (Catherine Keener) and their young daughter Olive (Amy Goldstein). Caden, who's had a critical success staging *Death of a Salesman* with young actors in the middle-age roles, is himself a premature old man; he hears mortality gargling at him everywhere. In the first scene, he wakes to a radio talk-show report about how the coming of autumn is a harbinger of death; from then on, Caden's life is one long fall. Reading the newspaper, Caden sees a headline about a playwright. "Harold Pinter's dead," he muses aloud. "No, wait, he won the Nobel Prize." He glances at the TV and sees his own animated form as part of a cartoon show, accompanied by the sing-song lyrics: "Then he died / Maybe someone cried / But not his ex-bride."

His ex-bride, Adele, is about to be his ex-wife. Invited to Berlin to mount an exhibition of her paintings, she tells Caden she'd prefer that he stay home; she'll take Olive with her. Soon, it's

clear, mother and child are gone for good. That leaves Caden open to the adoring advances of Hazel (Samantha Morton), who runs the box office at his theater. Her attentions hardly distract Caden from his obsessive suspicions of a physical breakdown: a bathroom accident has left him with a scar on his forehead and the skin disease known as sycosis. Before long, even sympathetic viewers will wonder if Caden is suffering from *psychosis*.

His one great career break — he's awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant, giving him a few hundred thousand dollars to pursue his theatrical dreams — will slowly break him over the rest of his long, increasingly demented life. Caden moves to Manhattan, rents a warehouse and in it constructs a smaller version of the city outside. Hiring a huge cast, he sets out to assemble an epic of ordinariness. His second wife, Claire (Michelle Williams), will be the star; the ever-loyal Hazel is his assistant. A stalker named Sammy (Tom Noonan) has got the job of portraying Caden; "I've been following you for 20 years," he tells the director. "So cast me and see who you really are."

No masterpiece is the work of a moment, but this theater piece is a long time coming — decades long, as the performers sink into their roles, live in the warehouse, blur the boundary between acting and living. Caden and Hazel are nearing old age by the time a celebrated actress, Millicent Weems (Dianne Wiest), joins the ensemble, also playing Caden, who is now seen in women's clothes and hair, looking strangely Millicentish. He gives Hazel a doppelganger (Emily Watson), who's also a magnet for his desperate sexual itch. But none of this gets Caden closer to realizing his project, or even naming it. (One title he toys with: "Infectious Diseases in Cattle.") Ensuring his despair are occasional glimpses of his now-grown daughter. First he spots Olive as a sex-club dancer, nude and tattooed. Later he visits Olive on her hospital deathbed. He stares at the rose that is tattooed on her arm and sees a real petal fall off.

Kaufman 8-1/2

Synecdoche, as you'll remember from seventh grade grammar class, is a figure of speech substituting the part for the whole (using "hands" for "sailors" in "all hands on deck"). Caden's parts, you could say, are irrevocably crumbling into a black hole of depression. Some of the movie's parts may stir confusion in the viewer, but the whole is clear: Caden is losing his spirit, his determination and his mind.

The obvious inspiration is Federico Fellini's *8-1/2*, in which Guido, a moviemaker with director's block, is beset by memories and fantasies as he dodges all the women in his life, from mother to wife to whore to mistress to muse. Caden has women problems (wife, daughter, mistress, actress); but *Synecdoche*, bless it, doesn't demean or dismiss any of them — except maybe the family shrink (Hope Davis), who tells Caden her new best-selling book can help him, then charges him \$45 for a copy. And this artist's problem is not the lack of an idea but his fidelity to it as it grows and grows and splits its seams. It's become a child he can't control, the alien seed he spawned.

Any creative person, indeed anyone who's launched some grand project (renovating a home, planting a garden, starting a business), must be familiar with this dread: that the creation has taken on its own life, that it will overwhelm and consume its creator, that the work will never be finished. Caden couldn't bring his magnificent idea to fruition. Kaufman did.

As with *8-1/2* and other challenging films of its time, *Synecdoche* poses cosmic questions about itself. Are we being shown Caden's imagination or projection of the rest of his life? Is the film fantasy or dread, or is it real? The answer, of course, is that it's a movie, which need only create an alternate world, populate it with memorable characters, and be true to its internal logic, however skewed. Kaufman has constructed a most devious puzzle, a labyrinth of an endangered mind. Yet it's one that — thanks in large part to a superb cast, led by Hoffman's unsparing, sympathetic, towering performance — should delight viewers who both work the movie out and surrender to its spell.

One big difference between *8-1/2* and other films, like *It's a Wonderful Life*, where the hero teeters on the precipice of suicide: It doesn't send in the clowns, or dispatch a bumbling angel. But *Synecdoche* is less forgiving of Caden than *8-1/2* is of Guido. Kaufman says that life is a series of lost chances, of doors closing, until some unseen prompter whispers a final word in your ear: "Die." The apparent bleakness of the film's ending — which is the ending we all must face — led many observers at Cannes, where the film had its world premiere, to infer that Kaufman's mood was no less morose than Caden's. "At times," wrote a reviewer in the *Times* of London, "it feels more like a suicide note than a movie." (That wouldn't be a first for this author. His 2005 audio play *Hope Leaves the Theater* ends with the character Charlie Kaufman committing suicide.)

Well, au contraire, *mes amis*. For one thing, this is a comedy about despair, as funny as it is bleak, and a complexly woven study of an unraveling soul. Kaufman didn't live (and die) this story, he made it up; and then he directed it, supervising a community of actors and artisans that must have numbered in the hundreds. More important, though, is the effect it should have on a receptive audience. No film with an ambition this large, and achievement this impressive, can be anything but exhilarating, a vital affirmation of the creative process.



Posted: Fri., May 23, 2008, 7:19am PT

Synecdoche, New York

A Likely Story/Projective Testing Service/Russia, Inc./Sidney Kimmel Entertainment presentation. (International sales: Kimmel Intl., New York.) Produced by Anthony Bregman, Charlie Kaufman, Spike Jones, Kimmell. Executive producers, William Horberg, Bruce Toll, Ray Angelic. Directed, written by Charlie Kaufman.



Caden Cotard - Philip Seymour Hoffman

Hazal - Samantha Morton
Claire Keen - Michelle Williams
Adele Lack - Catherine Keener
Tammy - Emily Watson
Ellen Bascomb/Millicent Weems - Dianne Wiest
Maria - Jennifer Jason Leigh
Madeleine Gravis - Hope Davis
Sammy Barnathan - Tom Noonan
Olive (age 4) - Sadie Goldstein
Olive (adult) - Robin Weigert

By [TODD MCCARTHY](#)

Like an anxious artist afraid he may not get another chance, [Charlie Kaufman](#) tries to Say It All in his directorial debut, "Synecdoche, New York." A wildly ambitious and gravely serious contemplation of life, love, art, human decay and death, the film bears Kaufman's scripting fingerprints in its structural trickery and multi-plane storytelling. At its core a study of a theater director whose life goes off the rails into uncharted artistic territory, it's the sort of work that on its face appears overreaching and isn't entirely digestible on one viewing. As such, it will intrigue Kaufman's most loyal fans but put off fair-weather friends on the art house circuit, where a venturesome distrib will have its work cut out for it to move the film commercially beyond cult status.

Unusually for a first film, the strangely titled opus feels more like a summation work, such as "8 1/2" or especially ["All That Jazz,"](#) as it centers on an artist who battles creeping infirmity and deathly portents by plunging into a grandiose project. On the most superficial level, many viewers will be nauseated by the many explicit manifestations of physical malfunction, bodily fluids, bleeding and deterioration. A larger issue will be the film's developing spin into realms that can most charitably be described as ambiguous and more derisively will be regarded as obscuritanist and incomprehensible.

At the same time, the picture exerts sufficient power and artistic mystery to pull the willing a fair way down its twisty trail, and a first-rate cast led by [Philip Seymour](#)

[Hoffman](#) and some wonderful women provide a constant lifeline even when it's hard to know what's going on.

For such serious and accomplished artists, Caden Cotard (Hoffman) and Adele Lack ([Catherine Keener](#)) live in surprisingly mundane and physically cramped circumstances in upstate Schenectady, New York. Caden, who directs a local theater company, and Adele, an adventurous painter, co-exist in a marginal way but seem mentally and emotionally preoccupied with their individual problems, an impression confirmed when Adele tells Caden to stay home while she and their little daughter fly off to Berlin, where she's having a major gallery opening.

Even before her departure, Caden has begun suffering from a litany of physical maladies as well as the realization that his directing work of others' plays allows him no room for genuine personal expression. At least Adele's departure would seem to open the door to Caden's consummation of a strong attraction between him and comely box-office worker Hazel (a curly red-haired [Samantha Morton](#)), who, in one early indication of oddities to come, purchases and soon occupies a house that's burning and full of smoke.

After Caden's disabilities worsen and things don't go awry with Hazel, the action explicitly jumps ahead to 2009, when he wins a MacArthur Grant and decides to undertake a theatrical venture in which an increasingly massive number of players will act, or reenact, life as Caden sees it in a freshly constructed replica of Manhattan under the big top of an enormous warehouse.

Yarn's multiple layers begin incrementally manifesting themselves at this stage. It would be folly to pretend that someone watching it all for the first time could innumerate, or even keep track of, every strand of Kaufman's doubling process, or make entirely coherent sense out of the life-versus-art, life-as-art, or art-instead-of-life postulations that come into play in the second half; viewers' reactions will vary to a great extent upon how far they're able to go with the writer-director before either giving up or giving in to his neurotic flights of fancy.

Without revealing too much, it can be said that Caden eventually casts an oddball actor (Tom Noonan), who's tall and thin rather than squat, to play himself in the evolving epic, and, as the Hazel equivalent, chooses an actress ([Emily Watson](#)) who's a near-lookalike. Emotional lines become crossed among these four, with both agreeable and dire results, but a through-line of worry, despair, loneliness and overriding unhappiness is provided by Caden and the fates of those in the tightest orbits around him. Characters age, mutate and transform themselves as Caden, who tells his cast he wants nothing from them but "the brutal truth," tries to play God but is done in at every turn by the simple fact that he's not cut out for the part.

Despite the general air of unpleasantness and anxiety, and the general feeling that the film, like Caden, could explode from overloaded circuits at any moment, Kaufman's venturesome dramaturgy and compelling writing scene-by-scene are enough to keep one's curiosity piqued. Significantly crushed by illnesses, the drudgery of life and his failures with women, Caden doesn't seem like the genius he sees himself as, and the inspiration triggered by the sudden blessing of complete artistic freedom may also be only a figment of his imagination. Whatever the case, Hoffman embodies him completely, forcing the audience to share his every physical and emotional wound.

Along from Keener as his moody, impulsive wife, who takes off early on, the other actresses shine as the women who both appreciate and tolerate Caden. Morton captivates as the adoring associate the director loves most, and Watson provides an ideal alter ego. Michelle Williams warmly shades the role of the theater's company's leading actress, cast as Caden's wife in the theater piece; Hope Davis (who could play [Hillary Clinton](#) when anyone decides to do that film) sharply etches Caden's blunt shrink; [Jennifer Jason Leigh](#) disappears into a German accent in a very strange role, and [Dianne Wiest](#) comes aboard as a late addition to the New York project.

Working with vet lenser [Fred Elmes](#), Kaufman tends to keep his frames tight, provoking a claustrophobic feel that matches Caden's usual psychological state. Production values come to the fore as the "set" for the ongoing theater project takes shape with evocative verisimilitude, with production designer [Mark Friedberg](#) and visual effects supervisor Mark Russell and an extensive effects team earning good marks. The long arcs of [Jon Brion](#)'s score go the extra mile to provide emotional continuity to the sometimes quickly changing scenes.

Camera (Deluxe color, widescreen), Fred Elmes; editor, [Robert Frazen](#); music, Jon Brion; music supervisor, [Bonnie Greenberg](#); production designer, Mark Friedberg; art director, [Adam Stockhausen](#); costume designer, [Melissa Toth](#); sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), [Drew Kunin](#); supervising sound editor, Philip Stockton; visual effects supervisor, Mark Russell; visual effects, [Brainstorm Digital](#); re-recording mixer, [Reilly Steele](#); assistant director, H.H. Cooper; casting, [Jeanne McCarthy](#). Reviewed at [Cannes Film Festival](#) (competing), May 23, 2008. Running time: 124 MIN.

View the article online at:

<http://www.variety.com/VE1117937263.html>

Bottom Line: Eternal bleakness of the feverish mind.

By Ray Bennett

May 23, 2008



Samantha Morton and Philip Seymour Hoffman

CANNES -- Oscar-winning screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's first film as a director, "Synecdoche, New York," will mesmerize some and mystify others, while many will be bored silly. It's not a dream, Kaufman says, but it has a dreamlike quality, and those won over by its otherworldly jigsaw puzzle of duplicated characters, multiple

environments and shifting time frames will dissect it endlessly.

Not bound for mainstream audiences, the hard-to-pronounce title, which sort of rhymes with Schenectady, N.Y., where it's set, will require careful nurturing to find its audience. That could take some time.

Philip Seymour Hoffman is perfect in the role of Caden Cotard, a regional theater director who wins a genius award that pays a vast fortune just as his artist wife, Adele (Catherine Keener), is leaving him because he has "disappointed" her.

From the Greek, meaning something that represents a bigger thing, as in the White House for the U.S. administration or Hollywood for the movie industry, "synecdoche" sums up what Caden creates to fill the gulf created when Adele takes their daughter to live in Berlin.

Determined to make a success, he takes over a vast building in which he plans to stage an ongoing drama with an enormous cast that ultimately matches and sometimes replaces what is happening in real life. He has a love affair with cheeky boxoffice clerk Hazel (Samantha Morton) and later casts lookalike Brit Tammy (Emily Watson) to play her in his never-ending show.

He hires beautiful actress Claire (Michelle Williams) to play his wife and then marries her for real when Hazel falls for hunky Derek (Paul Sparks).

Visiting Berlin in real time, Caden discovers that his daughter Olive (Sadie Goldstein) has been more or less adopted by the very intense Maria (Jennifer Jason Leigh).

Time flies by in decades, though some characters age and others do not. Caden hires an

actor named Sammy (Tom Noonan) to play him, and with two Hazels and two Cadens, life is bound to become even more confusing. Later, famed actress Millicent Weems (Dianne Wiest) joins the cast to play a maid, but when Tom dies she takes over the role of Caden.

None of this is easy to follow, and it requires concentration to stay up with all the changing characters and the many abrupt moves in all directions, but such is Kaufman's confidence as a filmmaker and his wonderful ability to write memorable dialogue that the converted will follow him anywhere.

Many scenes are flat-out hilarious -- Hazel lives in a house that is constantly on fire and filled with flames and smoke -- but the film has a deeply affecting aura of true melancholy. Mankind's knowledge of death and the unknowable depths of other people's minds are central to the story. Some sequences are simply there because it's the movies and movies should be fun, but others are both poetic and profound.

Disappointment and regret are key elements along with the muddled illusions, delusions and misapprehensions that afflict most of us. With his theatrical intellect, Caden is persuaded that in the world's population not one person is an extra; they are all the lead in their own story. Kaufman's ambitious and invigorating film finds that ineffably sad.

But before he closes with a scene of almost unbearable gravity, he gets in lots of gags including a series of titles Caden comes up with for his epic production, not the least of which is "Infectious Diseases in Cattle."

Cast: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Samantha Morton, Michelle Williams, Catherine Keener, Emily Watson, Dianne Wiest, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Hope Davis, Tom Noonan. Director: Charlie Kaufman. Screenwriter: Charlie Kaufman. Producers: Anthony Bregman, Spike Jonze, Charlie Kaufman, Sidney Kimmel. Director of photography: Fred Elmes. Production designer: Mark Friedberg. Music: John Brion. Costume designer: Melissa Toth. Editor: Robert Frazen. Executive producers: William Horberg, Bruce Toll, Ray Angelic.

Sales: Kimmel International.

MPAA rating R, running time 104 minutes.

View the article online at:

http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/awards_festivals/fest_reviews/article_display.jsp?&rid=11178

Synecdoche, New York

Allan Hunter in Cannes

23 May 2008



Dir/scri: Charlie Kaufman. US. 2008. 124mins.

Charlie Kaufman is a past master of ingenious conceits and wild flights of fantasy as witnessed particularly in *Being John Malkovich* and *Etternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. His talent has always been filtered through the vision of a sympathetic director but with *Synecdoche, New York* he assumes the director's role for the first time. The result is a film of staggering imagination, more daring in content than form as it explores the unbearable fragility of human existence and the sad inevitability of death.

Flashes of comic genius and melancholy insight into the human condition are woven into an increasingly elaborate canvas in which the boundaries between artifice and reality are slowly erased. Mainstream audiences are likely to find it simply too weird and unfathomable for their viewing pleasure but surely nobody expected Kaufman to make *What Happens In Vegas?* Fans of his previous work, admirers of actor Philip Seymour Hoffman and open-minded curiosity seekers should be enough to give the film a fighting chance of box-office returns on a level with previous Kaufman screenplays.

Synecdoche begins with material that lulls the viewers into the false expectation of a much more conventional film. Theatre director Caden (Hoffman) is staging a production of Arthur Miller's *Death Of A Salesman* and all around him there are signs and portents reminding him that life is short, death is always around the corner and time is running out to leave his mark on the world. His young daughter is concerned by the colour of her poo and his wife, artist Adele (Keener) confesses that she has fantasized about Caden dying and having the freedom to start over. This is the stuff of a Woody Allen comedy or a Philip Roth novel and written with the kind of bitter wit and eye for the offbeat that makes it both extremely funny and engaging.

The mood changes as the story gains in confidence and scope. In reality this is more like a sprawling John Irving doorstopper on life, love and death than a Philip Roth tale and there is a very literary quality to film's belief in the value and precision of language.

When Adele leaves for Germany and never returns, Caden is given a grant to create his masterwork and sets about devising a play in New York that will be the summit of his career. The creation of the play consumes decades of his life, absorbing incidents and characters from his everyday existence into the fabric of the piece. Along the way, he experiences love, loneliness, loss, death and utter dejection.

Kaufman directs this sprawl of ideas, twisted chronologies and bitter regrets with a tightly disciplined control of the material. As the laughter fades and the profundity takes over, *Synecdoche* may feel over long but everything plays a part in the bigger picture. The few touches of visual eccentricity include a house that is permanently smoking and licked with flames that is bought by Hazel (Morton), a box-office assistant who becomes one of the key women in Caden's life. Caden's magnum opus becomes something of a visual joke in itself as the sets grow to include a virtual recreation of Manhattan and characters multiple with actors hired to play Caden and Hazel starting their own stories that provide both parallels and alternatives to Caden's life.

Synecdoche is about one man's lifelong struggle to understand the meaning of his existence. Unadventurous audiences may feel the film is a two hour struggle to understand the meaning of its intentions but as the story appears to move in ever decreasing circles, it remains incredibly engaging and ultimately very moving. Hoffman gives a bravura performance that provides the film with all the focus it requires, capturing everything about Caden that makes him immensely sympathetic and instantly recognizable as a symbol of everyone on planet earth who is struggling with the challenges of being human.

Production Companies

Likely Story

Projective Testing Inc

Russia Inc

Sidney Kimmel Entertainment

Cinematography

Fred Elmes

Production design

Mark Friedberg

International sales

Kimmel International

Editor

Robert Frazen

Producers

Spike Jonze

Charlie Kaufman

Sidney Kimmel

Anthony Bergman

Music

Jon Brion

Main cast

Philip Seymour Hoffman

Samantha Morton

Michelle Williams

Catherine Keener

Emily Watson

Jennifer Jason Leigh

Executive producers

Ray Angelic

William Horberg

View the article online at:

<http://www.screendaily.com/ScreenDailyArticle.aspx?intStoryID=38803>

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

A LONG, STRANGE JOURNEY TOWARD A RETROSPECTIVELY INEVITABLE
DESTINATION

Friday, May 30, 2008

Cannes Day 9 & 10: Synecdoche, New York

By Matt Noller

It doesn't matter how big a Kaufman devotee you are, how many times you've seen *Being John Malkovich* or *Adaptation* or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. It doesn't matter what you've read or heard about *Synecdoche, New York*, his directorial debut, because nothing could possibly prepare you for the overwhelming mindfuckery on display. It is easily Kaufman's most ambitious project, which means that it is easily one of the most ambitious films I've ever seen. The role of the artist in society; coming to terms with death, God and fate; and the importance of escaping from the trap of solipsism in order to connect with others are among the most prominent themes, but they are far from the only ones. The sheer depth and complexity of the ideas Kaufman is out to explore here is mind-boggling.

Obviously, *Synecdoche, New York* is not an easy film, or a clean one. The first twenty minutes or so are relatively straight-forward, all things considered, as they detail the day-to-day life of a theatre director named Caden Cotard (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and his wife Adele (Catherine Keener). When Caden's health begins to deteriorate in strange and grotesque ways (the possibilities of these sicknesses being all in his head or being meant as a literalization of his fear of death seem quite likely), Adele takes his daughter to Berlin for a week-long trip. They never come home, and as the film becomes increasingly focused on Caden's mental state, things like temporal and narrative cohesion start to feel like a distant memory.



Caden receives a MacArthur genius

grant and sets out to perform an epic theatre piece in a huge space designed as a model of Schenectady, New York. The idea is to reproduce real life as theatre, and as Caden's life begins to influence his production, the lines between reality and fiction grow increasingly blurred. It becomes difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction, waking life and dreams. Characters collapse in on themselves and become other characters, they quit the play and they die, and all the while Caden stands behind the scenes as a self-absorbed God, until he too is consumed by his own project.

In its narrative structure, *Synecdoche, New York* is somewhat simpler than but similar to David Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE*. Like Lynch's brilliant fever-dream, Kaufman's film seems destined for heavily mixed reviews. Many will hate it. Those who love it will do so fully, passionately. Several days ago, I myself was unsure of my own reaction to the film, except to say that it was the most radical and, for lack of a better word, "essential" of all the films I saw at the Cannes Film Festival. Neither of those descriptors is a value judgment, however, and I now feel comfortable proclaiming it a work of messy genius and great artistic scope. I still need to see the film again as many times as possible, but right now, with the hustle and bustle of the festival behind me, I think it's some sort of masterpiece.

View the article online at:

<http://www.thehousenextdooronline.com/2008/05/cannes-2008-days-9-10.html>

The New York Times

MOVIES

CANNES JOURNAL

By A.O. SCOTT

Published: May 23, 2008

CANNES, France — On Wednesday morning festivalgoers — or at least the hordes of journalists who stumble into the Salle Lumière every day at 8:30 after a few hours' sleep and a hasty café au lait — were given a bit of a break. In a departure, there was no competition press screening on the schedule, which provided some of us with an opportunity to glance at the trades, have a second café au lait and rest our eyes in anticipation of a long night of revolutionary struggle.

This is one of the frustrations of Cannes, for American critics at least. We see lots of fascinating movies — not all good, but very few completely worthless — and then wonder if we, or our readers, will ever see them again. I'm not in the movie business (a mutually beneficial arrangement, believe me), and not inclined to speculate with someone else's money. I do hope, however, that sometime in the near future I can take part in the long and contentious conversation that "Che" deserves, and also see how my own initial ambivalence about the film resolves itself.

I have a similar hope for [Charlie Kaufman's "Synecdoche, New York,"](#) a movie about which I am not ambivalent at all. Puzzled? Yes. Unsure of its commercial prospects? As I said, that's none of my business. ("Synecdoche" is another competition entry looking for love in a marketplace of commitment-shy distributors.)

But Mr. Kaufman, the wildly inventive screenwriter of ["Being John Malkovich"](#) and ["Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,"](#) has, in his first film as a director, made those efforts look almost conventional. Like his protagonist, a beleaguered theater director played by [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#), he has created a seamless and complicated alternate reality, unsettling nearly every expectation a moviegoer might have about time, psychology and narrative structure.

But though the ideas that drive "Synecdoche, New York" are difficult and sometimes abstruse, the feelings it explores are clear and accessible. These include the anxiety of artistic creation, the fear of love and the dread of its loss, and the desperate sense that your life is rushing by faster than you can make sense of it. A sad story, yes, but fittingly for a movie bristling with paradoxes and conundrums, also extremely funny.

Nothing in Mr. Kaufman's film happens as you might expect it to, even if his previous work had conditioned you to expect surprises. Cannes, meanwhile, has a way of disappointing expectations even as it confirms them. After last year's

robust 60th-anniversary edition of the festival, which yielded so many great movies (and quite a few sales), this one feels like a bit of a letdown.

It's not that the films are bad, but rather that many of the directors in competition have, with their previous work, set such a high standard. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, with two Palmes d'Or already on their résumés, arrived this year with "Le Silence de Lorna," an engrossing movie about the moral struggle of a young Albanian immigrant in Belgium. It's very good. Not a masterpiece, though, which is what the Dardenne brothers have conditioned us to expect.

If it comes to Cannes, such a radical departure will surely encounter some grumbling. How come these filmmakers can't stick to what they're good at? But then again: Why don't they ever try something new? You may get the Palme d'Or, but you still can't win. There's no pleasing some people. Which may be why we keep coming back.

View the article online at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/23/movies/23cann.html?pagewanted=2&8dpc&_r=2



***Eternal Sunshine* writer Charlie Kaufman's first feature brilliant but baffling.**

by [Kaleem Aftab](#), IGN UK

UK, May 23, 2008 - The directorial debut from acclaimed screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind*) is a zany, irreverent reverie that is at times brilliant, especially when setting up the fantasy world the characters inhabit, but by the end a tad infuriating and often incomprehensible.

Despite its many faults it remains a highly ambitious, winning film that will - like *Donnie Darko* - have fans arguing over what it all exactly means for years to come. Essentially Kaufman has tried to make a movie in which the protagonist tries to decipher what the meaning of life is.

Philip Seymour Hoffman plays Caden Cotard, a theatre director living in Schnectady, upper state New York, who is in the process of preparing a new work in 2005 when his wife Adele (Catherine Keener) decides to leave him and move to Berlin with their daughter. A bathroom accident results in Cotard cutting his head open and from that moment on Cotard loses touch with reality.

Time jumps at bizarre unexplainable rates, events that seem to be happening on the day are revealed by sly uses of calendars to be taking place, weeks, months or even years afterwards. Characters age at different rates. His daughter becomes an adult (Robin Weigart) in seemingly no time at all. His psychiatrist (Hope Davis) is writing a book about Caden and their relationship begins and ends on the pages of her books. Other characters do quirky unbelievable things. A young woman Hazel (Samantha Morton) infatuated with Caden moves into a house that is constantly in the state of burning down. The action inexplicably jumps to 2009 when the now single theatre director is awarded a MacArthur genius grant and decides to put on the most magnificent theatre play ever staged.

Kaufman is occupied by themes that have appeared in his other scripts: the vagaries of memory (*Eternal Sunshine*), the struggle of an artist (*Adaptation*), and the desire to inhabit another life (*Being John Malkovich*). Like all Kaufman scripts, the ideas behind the action are stunning; he's a master at setting up situations that always seem to run into cul-de-sacs and meet unsatisfactory ends.

After a brilliant introduction to the world, the film becomes an increasingly bizarre and wacky collection of scenes as Caden decides to put his own life on-stage, strangely employ an actor (Tom Noonan) who shares none of his physical characteristics and a

near-lookalike (Emily Watson) to play Hazel.

It's at this point that any attempts to follow the plot become futile on a single viewing. Kaufman throws everything into this picture including the kitchen sink. It's so ambitious and different that it has to be admired. Towards the end of the film it's stated that you have to go back to the beginning to understand what's happening and the film starts with a reference to British playwright Harold Pinter. As such Kaufman's film is best understood as a tribute to the memory plays with which Pinter made his name. But any greater conclusions will only come after we've seen it a few more times.

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<http://movies.ign.com/articles/876/876322p1.html>