

Barney's Version: Should mediocrity be celebrated in this way?

By David Walsh
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Directed by Richard J. Lewis, screenplay by Michael Konyves, based on the novel by Mordecai Richler

Barney's Version is a film directed by Richard J. Lewis, from the 1997 novel by Canadian writer Mordecai Richler (who died in 2001).

It more or less follows the adult life of Barney Panofsky (Paul Giamatti), from hedonistic days as a young man in Europe in the 1970s to his wealth and success as a television producer back in Montreal, examining in the process his relations with his friends, his father and his three wives.

Barney is not an especially appealing figure. In Rome, in 1974, he marries a troubled young woman whom he believes he has impregnated. After the baby is born stillborn and turns out not to be his, Barney leaves her and she commits suicide. Returning home to Canada, he meets his second wife (Minnie Driver), the vulgar daughter of a wealthy businessman. At their wedding reception, he meets and falls for Miriam (Rosamund Pike).

Barney carries on with his unhappy marriage until his wife betrays him with his best friend, Boogie (Scott Speedman), a heroin-addicted, would-be novelist. The latter disappears during a drunken tussle with Barney at a cottage in the country, and suspicion falls on Barney for a time. By now, he heads Totally Unnecessary Productions, which turns out a long-running soap opera.

Ultimately, Barney divorces his second wife and marries Miriam, the love of his life. They spend some happy years together and produce two children. His selfishness and inattention, and one indiscretion, combine to wreck that relationship. In the end, he is on his own, with failing mental powers.

Barney is not an especially appealing figure, but then neither is almost anyone else in the film. His best friend, Boogie, is something of a parasite, a weakling. His first wife is neurotic and self-destructive, his second merely

obnoxious and stupid. His father (Dustin Hoffman), a former policeman, is well-meaning enough but decidedly crude.

Miriam is painted in a more attractive light, but aside from her physical and mental charm, it is not clear how much there is to her as a human being. A good deal is made of her eventual career as a radio interviewer, as though the vocation represented some sort of astonishing breakthrough.

All in all, this is a collection of, at best, mediocre individuals.

Of course, mediocrity in various manifestations (provincialism, passivity, conformism, etc.) is an entirely legitimate subject for artists. World literature, for example, would be much poorer without Charles and Emma Bovary, Oblomov, George F. Babbitt and countless others. Robert Musil devoted many years to a work entitled *The Man Without Qualities*. And there is Leo Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilych*.

Everything depends, however, on the artistic approach and social viewpoint.

For the most part, the artists have tended to treat less-than-inspiring personalities and lives to bring out something about the society that produced, or required, them. Whether the artist had a directly socially-critical idea in mind or not, such portraits in the modern age have often helped demystify a time when everything, including "virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc ... passed into commerce" (*The Poverty of Philosophy*, Karl Marx).

In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, the lead character is a self-important, self-deluded judge, who suddenly finds himself afflicted by a fatal disease. The author sums things up in the second chapter: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."

Ilych has never done anything other than what Russian

society expected him to do. The “further he departed from childhood and the nearer he came to the present the more worthless and doubtful were the joys.” After school, Ilych entered the service of a governor and some pleasant moments occurred. “Then all became confused and there was still less of what was good ... His marriage, a mere accident, then the disenchantment that followed it, his wife’s bad breath and the sensuality and hypocrisy: then that deadly official life and those preoccupations about money, a year of it, and two, and ten, and twenty, and always the same thing. And the longer it lasted the more deadly it became.”

Finally, Ilych realizes “that he had not spent his life as he should have done ... It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend.” Hence the torment of his mental sufferings.

A Tolstoy, of course, is extremely rare. But the path of criticizing life as it is presently lived, and not apologizing for it, is open to anyone.

Unhappily, Lewis’s Barney Panofsky never seriously questions his life, nor does anyone else in the film. Although they have unhappy moments, and personal crises, the various characters are for the most part rather pleased with themselves and the circles in which they travel.

Barney’s Version presents us with mostly selfish and unconscious people, and then asks us to embrace them, *as they are*. The movie doesn’t, for the most part, suggest hidden depths and redeeming qualities, or extraordinary potential, although Barney can be obliging and amusing at times. The filmmakers would have us accept the individuals, their preoccupations and their era as they see themselves.

The spectator, however, may mutiny and quietly explain: “I don’t like these people very much and I’m not very interested in what happens to any of them.” And try to make out his or her watch in the dark.

One of the more unpleasant features of the film is its tendency to sneer at characters whom Barney disdains. Thus, he marries his second wife (Driver), because of her attractiveness, and perhaps her family’s wealth, and then

discovers she doesn’t meet his high intellectual standards. Audience members are expected to join in the snickers at the expense of this woman, who doesn’t even merit a name of her own (she is listed in the credits as “The 2nd Mrs. P”). It’s not clear how Barney, a “TV hustler married to a rich man’s daughter,” as his friend accurately describes him, towers above her.

None of this should be construed as objecting to ugliness or ordinariness in art. Not at all. Something artistic and illuminating can be and has been made out of nearly any life or social setting. But a bigger, richer perspective has to be applied. Mediocrity can’t be defined in its own terms, but only *relatively*, in relation to genuine talent, or commitment, or passion, even if that is only lodged in the artistry and piercing insight of the work itself.

Richler’s novel and the film version of it treat, for the most part, fairly stagnant and reactionary decades. Barney, as far as we know, was never a political radical. His rebellion apparently never extended beyond doing drugs, growing a beard and traipsing around Europe. Without too much apparent internal conflict, he settles for and into an empty, bourgeois existence. It has been waiting for him, like a pair of comfortable slippers sitting by the door.

Nonetheless, the limited choices open to Barney are not of his making. He is not a monster, but simply someone who all too easily flows with the current. If the filmmakers had treated the period and personalities objectively and critically, there might have been something here.

That possibility disappears, once and for all, however, in the final portion of the film, by which time the audience, along with Miriam and Barney’s children, is supposed to be firmly back on his side. We are being called on to recognize how endearing he has been all along. The spectator may beg to differ.

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