

Episode 11 - Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008)

Introduction

MUSIC: Barcelona by Giulia Y Los Tellarini.

VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA is the 38th film written and directed by Woody Allen, first released in 2008.

REBECCA HALL stars as Vicky, and SCARLETT JOHANSSON stars as Cristina. Two friends who have decided to spend the summer in Barcelona. The two friends have very different views on love, and their lives take very different paths when they encounter Juan Antonio, played by JAVIER BARDEM and his ex-wife Maria Elena, played by PENELOPE CRUZ.

Woody Allen's London period became a European period with VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA. And unlike his London films, which were re-written from American settings, Spain is a deep part of this film. A mix of romance and morality, it is rightly considered one of the highlights of his later career.

Welcome to the Woody Allen Pages Podcast, by me, the creator of the Woody Allen Pages website. This week, episode 11, we look at 2008's VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA. How it was conceived, how it was made, and how it was so unlike any other Woody Allen film. Spoilers are everywhere so watch the film first, then come back.

JUAN ANTONIO: Mm-hm? Why not? Life is short. Life is dull. Life is full of pain. And this is a chance for something special. VICKY: Right, well, who-who exactly are you?

Conception and story

From the beginning, Allen enjoyed huge success internationally, far outshining whatever success in America. And when, in the late 2000s, Allen started to be open to shooting abroad, the offers came from all corners. Italy, Brazil, France, Sweden and more came with offers for Allen to make a film in their country.

The problem would be to find the story. So far, by 2008, Allen had made three films in London - and all three were New York ideas rewritten for London. But when the financing came together for Spain, Allen set about crafting a film that reflected how he saw that country.

Barcelona is so different from New York or London. Those last two cities are urban and metropolitan, with skyscrapers, busy streets and people everywhere. The story Allen wanted to write reflected a different feel than just about any Woody Allen film. This is dirt paths and bicycles. No skyscrapers in sight.

Another change was how Allen approached the script. Allen usually never writes for actors. Even during the periods where he worked with DIANE KEATON or MIA FARROW consistently, he was open for them to take any of the female roles in the script. But this time he had SCARLETT JOHANSSON wanting to work together again, and he also got calls out of the blue from PENELOPE CRUZ and JAVIER BARDEM. Neither of those last two Spanish actors knew Allen but Allen was a fan. So he went about writing a story for these actors.

Allen did have the idea of a summer trip movie with two young women, so he settled on that trip being to Barcelona. He wrote one of the travellers as a role for Johansson and the locals that complicated their trip would be Cruz and Bardem. With two leads he could attack what he wanted to talk about from two angles, and also cut from story to story to give the film some pace. Importantly Allen used what he loved about Barcelona and Spain in the script.

JUDY: To your summer in Barcelona. Welcome. Salud. MARK: Salud.

Spain does love Allen - and Allen loves Spain. There is a statue of Woody Allen in Oviedo, where part of VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA was set. People think it was put there to mark the time he filmed in that city, but it actually went up in 2005. In 2002, Allen was awarded the Prince Of Asturias Award - for notable achievements in science, humanities and public affairs. It's a huge honour and a huge ceremony in Spain, like their own Nobel Prize. It's such an honour that Allen even turned up to the ceremony and made a speech, something he almost never does.

In his speech he quoted comedian Jack Benny and talked about how much European films and culture meant to him.

WOODY ALLEN: A great American comedian of the past had -Jack Benny- the very best line for such a stupendous occasion as this. When he won a very prestigious award, he said: "I don't deserve this award, but I have diabetes and I don't deserve that either".

The story that Allen ended up with was about Vicky - played by REBECCA HALL - and Cristina - played by SCARLETT JOHANSSON. Two women who spend a summer in Barcelona, who go on very different journeys.

Cristina is the romantic - who wants the wild life. She is open to the adventures in front of her. And that adventure is represented by Juan Antonio.

Vicky is settled - engaged and she knows her path. She knows what her life is going to be when she returns. And her life is disturbed by Juan Antonio.

It probably unfair to say the inciting incident for both Vicky and Cristina is Juan Antonio, it's probably more Spain itself. That they left their comfort zone. When he proposes the weekend trip to the both of them, their reactions could not be more different.

Vicky is immediately defensive - and just at the edge of being too defensive. If there is anything close to a Woody Allen surrogate here, it's Vicky. She is cynical and untrusting of this bohemian life before her. There's times where the dialogue does have a sense of that traditional Woody Allen-ness.

JUAN ANTONIO: What offended you about the offer? Surely not that I find you both beautiful and desirable. VICKY: Offended me, no. It's very amusing, galling, to be honest, but, uh, is it my imagination or is it getting a little late? Shall we go? CRISTINA: I would love to go to Oviedo.

So Vicky and Cristina are opposites, and Allen plays them as such. A lot of this film is about body language - and for Vicky and Cristina, their body language tells us a huge amount. At the end of their first day with Juan Antonio, there's a lovely scene where Vicky and Cristina are on the same sofa - and Vicky is arms crossed and on guard, whilst Vicky is reclined and open to what happens next. Vicky spends a lot of the film with her arms crossed.

Things change for Vicky when she is forced by circumstance to live part of Cristina's fantasy. We think we know what will happen next - Cristina and Juan Antonio will come together and other complications will ensue. Instead, Cristina gets sick and it's Vicky who ends up having the romantic weekend with a charming artist. She ends up having the conversations about poetry and art and passion that Cristina probably would have wanted and would have swooned over. And it opens up stirring something inside her.

VICKY: So, tell me, why won't your father publish his poems? JUAN ANTONIO: Well, because he hates the world, and that's his way of getting back at them. To create beautiful works and then to deny them to the public, which I think, it's... VICKY: What makes him so angry toward the human race? JUAN ANTONIO: Because after thousands of years of civilization, they still haven't learned to love.

Her fiancé Doug represents her sensible future and Allen never turns him into a straw man. With just a small tweak, Allen could have made Doug a bit of a loser, but he doesn't, and it doesn't give Vicky any excuses to be unfaithful. Doug is absolutely a decent guy and he is nothing but loving towards her. He's a bit boring and not an artist, but he's a good guy.

The other side is Judy, played by PATRICIA CLARKSON, who is housing the girls. She is having an affair - but her passionate life is full of trouble. She is living a double life, full of regret, married to man she doesn't love anymore. But her life is dishonest.

JUDY: I'm sure any dissatisfaction I have is my own problem. I'm just, I can't leave him and I know that I never will. VICKY: Well...why not? JUDY: I'm just, I can't. I'm too scared. And the moment's passed.

The path in front of Vicky is not really about love. I don't think Vicky falls in love with Juan Antonio - nor do I think we the audience are supposed to feel like Vicky and Juan Antonio are meant for each other. Juan Antonio says as much at one point that within a month they would be at each other's throats. And she has her head turned by Ben, a charming, cultured American guy who shares her love of Spanish culture.

The problem for Vicky is all internal. That there is a passion in her that is not fulfilled, and taken out of her comfort zone and in Barcelona, it becomes more clear. It's a subtle bit of character work, but Doug mentions that Vicky even makes love differently in Barcelona.

Throughout Vicky's story, there is talk of missing the moment, or how quickly time passes and your chance gets away. Vicky's story ends when she sees Juan Antonio again and is involved in a small gun fight. And she sees for sure that this artist's life of passion is not for her. But she ends up still longing for something.

I think the film really belongs to Vicky. She's the one taken most out of her comfort zone and learns the most. And her fate might be Judy's, that she will be married, settled and unhappy, quietly longing for a passionate love that she won't have.

Where Vicky learns that her nightmare might have something in it for her, Cristina gets her wish and it doesn't quite work out.

Cristina believes that suffering is part of romance - and she gets to see that close up. There's a nice subtle character moment in the early gallery scene where Cristina sees Juan Antonio for the first time. She is looking at art and asking about the artist, rather than the work. She is more curious about the passionate people behind the works. And then Allen focusses in on her face when she overhears the story of Juan Antonio's messy divorce, showing her to be excited.

MARK: He's a painter. Remember? Diego told us about him? He had that fiery relationship with that beautiful woman who was nuts? JUDY: Oh, my God. MARK: With the violent fighting and he had the messy divorce. It was in all the

newspapers. Yeah, that's him. JUDY: Oh, it is. Oh, my God. His name is Juan Antonio Gonzalo and he had this hot divorce and she tried to kill him. Or he tried to kill her. CRISTINA: What? JUDY: It was this, like really big thing in the art world. I can't remember the details but he, you know, we don't move in those bohemian circles, so I don't know.

Cristina is a frustrated artist - a type of character that Allen has written about before. See Renata in INTERIORS, or Melinda in MELINDA AND MELINDA. Allen returns to this idea that artistic frustration can lead to existential angst. So she gets the next best thing - an artist as a boyfriend and his arty friends.

She also falls in love with her lifestyle with Juan Antonio. In voiceover, we are told that she imagines her life here and starts to forget her American life.

NARRATOR: She was already thinking of herself as a kind of expatriate not smothered by what she believed to be America's puritanical and materialistic culture, which she had little patience for. She saw herself more a European soul, in tune with the thinkers and artists she felt expressed her tragic, romantic, freethinking view of life.

But that is shattered by Maria Elena. Just her presence brings Cristina back down to earth. She speaks a different language and makes Cristina feel like an outsider again. Maria Elena is a true artist - Cristina made a short film she is not happy with.

CRISTINA: I feel kinda sad. JUAN ANTONIO: Why? CRISTINA: 'Cause I feel like I'm never gonna be able to influence you or inspire you in any way. JUAN ANTONIO: Oh, no, that's not true. CRISTINA: That's how I feel. JUAN ANTONIO: That's not true.

But Maria Elena and Cristina don't end up in conflict. You would think she's this agent of chaos - like Maureen Stapleton in Interiors.

I really love Allen's depiction of artists. In a way it's comical - Allen depicts them as these other kinds of people who drink a lot and discuss deep ideas, like Juan Antonio's friends. But they also talk about art as important and a thing to be nurtured. Juan Antonio and Maria Elena, who are artists, know the value of nurturing talent and confidence in Cristina. I don't know who mentored Allen, but it's a lovely depiction of artistic mentoring.

In the end though, Cristina has to leave. She doesn't really give a reason - and neither does Allen. She seems to have exactly what she wanted, but a familiar unhappiness drives her away.

Maria Elena accuses her of being chronically unhappy. Perhaps that's the case - and Allen is trying to say something about a type of romantic person who can never just be happy, and it becomes toxic.

JUAN ANTONIO: There is no answer, Cristina. There is no, there is no single answer. CRISTINA: Please don't get so upset. Please. And can you speak English? I can't understand you. JUAN ANTONIO: A ver, habla inglés, por favor. MARIA ELENA: Nunca se va a conformar con nada, esta niña. JUAN ANTONIO: María Elena, habla inglés, para que te pueda entender. MARIA ELENA: Sabía que nos la ibas a jugar, sabía que nos la ibas a jugar y nos la has jugado. Cómo lo sabía. JUAN ANTONIO: Ya, vale, vale... MARIA ELENA: ¡Cómo lo sabía, cómo lo sabía! JUAN ANTONIO: Ya. Maria Elena. Por fav...Speak English, please so she can understand it, all right? Ya. MARIA ELENA: Chronic dissatisfaction. That's what you have. Chronic dissatisfaction. Big sickness. Big sickness.

I think there's a case of Cristina still feeling like she doesn't fit. Or perhaps she is not as free spirited as she thinks.

What haunts Cristina at the end of the film is that she doesn't really know why it didn't work out. And that maybe her dream when she came to Barcelona in the summer - to have this romance and free spirited life - isn't her either. Then who is she?

For both women, they end on a note of ambiguity. They lived in their own fantasies of what they thought love would be, and they both leave Barcelona unsure. It's a great ambiguous ending. It's a romance where neither woman get the man. The only happiness is that maybe both women have set a more honest standard of what happiness is for them, and we hope they find it. And that's not much of a happy ending.

I find it so interesting that Cristina and Vicky don't come into conflict. A lesser film would make this some sort of love triangle - one of those typical rivalries where women have to fight over a man. Instead the two friends are thoughtful and supportive. I love how Vicky goes and comforts Cristina when her life with Juan Antonio and Maria Elena comes to an end. And I love how Cristina, who is more open hearted and sensitive, finds a spot to look out at the water when she needs to find closure. Cristina also says she always would have stepped away if Vicky had told her how she felt.

CRISTINA: But I would have stepped aside. VICKY: No, look. I knew you had feelings for Juan Antonio from the moment you saw him. CRISTINA: But if I knew what had happened, I never would have gone ahead with it. VICKY: Well, look, it was a passing thing.

In fact there's no judgement across the board. Juan Antonio comes in strong but he becomes this complex character that we like him a lot throughout the film. Allen doesn't make him ridiculous or selfish. He's just honest, confident and passionate. He's always caring for people. And even the Cristina/Maria Elena relationship is ultimately one of love and affection, not rivalry.

It's a film built on small moments. The dramas that befall our heroines are an accidental touching of a foot at a meal, or a bit of stubborn back pain. Those are the moments that we connect with more than the incidental shooting of a gun towards the end of the film. It also makes that final gun scene feel like it lives in a different film, from a different point of view. It's the least convincing scene in the film. It crosses over into melodrama. It's like a soap opera.

It's also not a very funny film. There is really only two bits that illicit any sort of a chuckle for me. One is at the country side picnic when it's revealed that Maria Elena went through Cristina's bags, especially because it comes after such an intimate moment.

CRISTINA: How do you know I take pictures? MARIA ELENA: I found them in your luggage. CRISTINA: You went through my luggage? MARIA ELENA: Of course I went through your luggage. First night I was in the house, I didn't trust you. I didn't believe you were who you said you were. I wanted to know who was really sharing the bed of my ex-husband. CRISTINA: What?!

The other is when Doug finds out about Cristina's new bohemian lifestyle. Neither are big laughs at all. Just a bit of culture clash comedy. Not even a witty one liner.

As if to make the point, there is a moment at a dinner with their New York friends where Doug goes to tell a joke. I'm sure in the take, the actor CHRIS MESSINA actually tells a joke. But Allen fades him out for music and we focus in on Vicky instead. Allen throws away a very easy opportunity to give the audience a simple smile for something deeper and better.

SALLY: We did it modern with just a splash of antiques here and there. I love combining the two, but God, the prices. Do you have any idea what a good size oriental rug costs? DOUG: She's right. She's right. Actually, there's an old joke. "A hundred thousand for a Persian rug?..."

This is probably Allen's least funny romantic film. It's also probably his most passionate when it comes to sex. It's almost all in Cristina's side of the story - but there are several scenes of simulated love making. And Allen shoots them with warmth. He's shot sex scenes before - there was a deliberately awkward one in *Hannah And Her Sisters* that was ultimately cut. There's an awkward one

Husbands And Wives. Usually, Allen cuts away and you just see what happens after like in ANNIE HALL or IRRATIONAL MAN. But the scenes here work with the script - that Christina's artistic awakening is also a sexual one.

So there's no quick fire dialogue. No droll one liners. No busy city. Lots of sex. Lots of Spanish dialogue. It doesn't sound like a Woody Allen film at all.

What is very Allen-y, especially in this period, is the voiceover. It's something Allen has employed a little before, famously in Radio Days or Everyone Says I Love You. Here the voiceover is both good and bad. It's bad in that it tells so much of the story, it fills in the gaps left by the filmmaking. Sure, it works better at the start when the narrator tells us about Vicky and Cristina, and how they love. But it's not as good as a scene where they show it. But it is good when it adds intimacy, like when we look at Vicky's face as she listens to music, and it's like hearing the voice in her head.

NARRATOR: On balmy summer nights, the girls would sometimes go to hear Spanish guitar music, which never failed to move Vicky in some magical way.

So what is Allen trying to say in this film?

He's returning to an old theme of his - which is love is often not what you expect. Vicky thinks she has it all figured out. Cristina thinks that love is just passion. Both learn that they're wrong. And for both, the real lesson is somewhere between love is more complicated than you think, or love is unknowable all together.

But what Allen is tapping into is that holiday feeling when you're not yourself. When you are open to new things, and you fantasise about a new life. I'm sure everyone goes to Barcelona and spends a moment wondering what it's actually like to live here. For Allen, even that little fantasy has no easy answers.

JUAN ANTONIO: The trick is to enjoy life, accepting that it has no meaning whatsoever. CRISTINA: No meaning? VICKY: Right. CRISTINA: You don't even think that authentic love gives life meaning. JUAN ANTONIO: Yes, but love is...so transient. Isn't it? I was in love with the most incredible woman and in the end... VICKY: Yes? JUAN ANTONIO:...she put a knife into me. CRISTINA: My God, that's terrible VICKY: Well, maybe you did something to deserve it.

Production, Cast And Crew

VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA was filmed in Spain, mainly Barcelona and Oviedo, as well as a couple of small scenes in New York. It was Allen's first time shooting in Spain, although he would return for RIFKIN'S FESTIVAL almost a decade later.

I find it interesting that Allen didn't make a film in English just in Spain. He would go on to make *Midnight In Paris* and *Rifkin's Festival* which would be just that. But here, he isn't frightened to have long sections in Spanish. Allen grew up loving European directors and he said with this film he finally got to be one.

The production went incredibly smoothly, even by Allen's standards at this time. We don't know of any big reshoots or rewrites, or any deleted scenes. No one hired got their scenes cut, or got recast. This all seems to have gone pretty smoothly. And as is usual when Allen shoots abroad, he brought his entire family with him. His two kids even make a cameo in the film. It sounds like everyone had a great time. I don't know how much acting had to happen to make the cast look like they're having fun in the amusement park scene.

And it helps when he has such an A grade cast. Allen is always seen as an outlier in America with his low budget dramas and his film a year schedule. But that's the way it's done outside of America, where budgets are modest but cinemas still need to be filled. And PENELOPE CRUZ and JAVIER BARDEM know how to make films like this. They just turn up and they own the scenes they are in. No months of rehearsing. No sitting on a script for two years.

Take PENELOPE CRUZ, who won the Academy Award for her performance. She has barely half an hour in the film, but she comes in like a hurricane, and then plays the maternal figure and a loving partner. You can see in the scene just after she arrives that she plays the character as angry, then cooling down but suspicious, yet smart and assessing everything. She is later utterly charming. I'm not sure if she is supposed to look like a mess when she is at her lowest, but she still just looks like the gorgeous PENÉLOPE CRUZ. If only we all looked that good after a suicide attempt at a bus station.

MARIA ELENA: It's all in his head. He has so much tension. Oh, to the world, he's carefree, nothing matters, life is short and with no purpose kind of thing. But all his fear just goes to his head.

JAVIER BARDEM is so great as Juan Antonio. He's overwhelmingly passionate. He's always leaning on things. When he's at the church early in the film, looking at a statue, talking about the transience of love, he is lightly stroking the walls. The way he hugs his father is so intimate. His character is tactile and full of passion and he plays to it so well, without showing off. His turn in NO COUNTRY

FOR OLD MEN, where he plays one of the coldest and most dispassionate characters in all of cinema, was just a year earlier.

Allen likes to let his actors improvise, but Allen didn't have any idea what Bardem and Cruz were arguing about when they spoke Spanish. But you don't really have to. The scene where they spill out into the street arguing is utterly compelling.

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, as predicted, without Cristina, the relationship between Juan Antonio and Maria Elena had gone back to its old destructiveness.

Also coming from Spanish filmmaking was JAVIER AGUIRRESAROBE, the cinematographer. He had worked with Pedro Almodovar's TALK TO HER and the wonderful The Sea Inside which starred JAVIER BARDEM. SONIA GRANDE, the costume designer had also worked on both films. ALAIN BAINÉE was the Spanish production designer. Allen would work with all three again. Allen not only shot in Spain, he basically shot the film as if he was part of the Spanish film industry.

Although long time editor ALISA LEPSALTER was there when Allen took all the footage back to New York. And JULIET TAYLOR led the casting of the leads in the US, with a Spanish team casting the smaller roles and extras.

Allen isn't shy about showing some of Barcelona's wonderful landmarks on screen. Over the course of the film we see plenty of places that would be on any list of things to do in Barcelona on holiday. We see lots of the works of brilliant architect ANTONIO GAUDI. His great, unfinished church La Sagrada Familia, the rooftop of Casa Mila, the statues across Parc Guell. And those works are still joyous and brave. There's also statues by JOAN MIRÓ.

But Allen puts them all that stuff at the front of the film. Like the way you do when you're on holidays and you get the must see stuff out of the way. The film then relaxes into candlelit restaurants, outside dining and then just gorgeous shots of the sea. It helps that cinematographer Aguirresarobe has washed the film in yellow and oranges. The film never feels cold or dark, even at night.

The camera doesn't move around too much or make itself too obvious. Allen's preference for long takes and not breaking up scenes really helps this film feel slow and relaxed. It doesn't feel energetic.

In particular I love the shot in the countryside when Juan Antonio gets his back pain, and Cristina goes and gets pain killers. The camera follows Cristina to the bikes and never cuts. She comes back and Maria Elena in in her place. It doesn't build tension - it's just this slow shot that makes us feel like we are there. The impact comes from Cristina, seeing this woman suddenly, when we thought we knew where the shot was going.

There's lots of really great directing and storytelling. Take the simple scene

on Juan Antonio's home, where we see a pot of boiling water, then we pan out to see him and Cristina locked in passion on the floor. We know what is happening and we know how they got there. It's great storytelling and the opposite of the sometimes hammy voiceover.

There is also a lot of story telling in just the body language, as I mentioned.

It's all these small things that make this film so great. The rest of the American cast are solid. Chris Messina plays Doug well without making him seem a loser. Patricia Clarkson is great in everything and Allen loved working with her. They would work together again in Allen's next film, *Whatever Works*.

When it came to music, Allen embraced the European setting. There are moments when Vicky goes and watch flamenco guitar music so it's no surprise that the soundtrack features lots of flamenco guitar music.

Of the performers, there's a mix of famous legends like Juan Serrano and Paco de Lucia. And then there were newcomers like Biel Ballester and Stéphane Wrembel. Wrembel in particular would work with Allen again in *Midnight In Paris* and *Rifkin's Festival*.

Emilio De Benito appears in the film as a flamenco guitar player. His performance of Granada is used as Vicky's love theme.

The opening credits song is Barcelona by independent band GIULIA Y LOS TELLARINI. The girlfriend of one of the band members somehow managed to leave a CD in Allen's hotel room. In another move and another thing that he never does, he took the CD, put on the track and liked it. Soon, the production team was trying to contact the band through MySpace. Remember MySpace? Well MySpace might be gone but this track still sounds pretty good. And I really don't encourage people to leave stuff in Woody Allen's hotel rooms. But this time it actually worked out.

Here's GIULIA Y LOS TELLARINI with Barcelona.

Music - Barcelona by GIULIA Y LOS TELLARINI

Release and Reception

VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on 17 May 2008, and rolled out around the world from August onwards. The production studio was the Spanish company Mediapro. They would work with Allen many more times, including most of Allen's European films in the next decade and a half.

Penelope Cruz was particularly praised for her role as Maria Elena, although she's actually onscreen for very little. She won an Academy Award, a BAFTA, a Gaudi and much more. The film also won for Best Film - Comedy or Musical - at the Golden Globes. Whatever that means.

CRUZ: Thank you so much to the Academy. I want to share this with my fellow nominees and with the amazing ensemble of actors I had the privilege to work with in this movie. Thank you Woody for trusting me with this beautiful character.

Thank you having written over all these years some of greatest characters for women.

Cruz gets the praise, but REBECCA HALL is not on the poster. Cristina is probably the major character, but the poster features Johansson, Cruz and Bardem, all cropped together. It seems incredibly unfair for Hall.

Still the film was a commercial success, with or without Rebecca Hall on the poster. Not adjusted for inflation, it was Allen's most successful film ever at the time of release, just shy of \$100 million at the box office. It beat the very successful Match Point, but I think Match Point's success is one of the reasons why this film did so well. SCOOP in 2006 came out in the shadow of MATCH POINT and CASSANDRA'S DREAM was buried and not marketed. For most people, VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA was the follow up to MATCH POINT.

That success would be overshadowed by MIDNIGHT IN PARIS a few years later. But this was part of the incredibly successful European period for Allen. His films were getting critical acclaim and the actors were winning awards. It also helps that the film industry was being divided in two. On one end was the increase in big budget blockbusters. On the other was the specialty box office that lived on film festivals and reviews. In that specialty film world, far away from films like The Dark Knight, Allen was being reassessed as a legend.

This film just feels so different from anything else Woody Allen has ever done. It's so rural and laidback. And it makes Allen's old themes seem fresh.

I don't know if Allen has ever made a film this purely romantic before. It's not a comedy - it's just not funny. But it's also not one of his high minded, life, death and god dramas. This is a romance, and not necessarily even a happy one. Perhaps the closest is 1999's SWEET AND LOWDOWN.

But just because there wasn't a murder, didn't mean there wasn't big themes. Allen wants to talk about art and love. In other films, even other Allen films, the talk about Juan Antonio's father being a poet so tortured that he doesn't publish could come across silly. Here, it's not. This is a world of artists. Everyone seems to know at least one person who owns an art gallery. But somehow it works.

And let's face it, whenever I watch this film I immediately think I have to get to Spain. Where I can just eat outside, listen to Spanish guitar, ride my bike and meet beautiful strangers.

This really is a wonderful film and I wish Allen would make more like it. He's the master of complex emotions and writing characters lost in the messiness of

love.

At its best it's right up there with the romantic matters of the heart that Allen created and looked at in HANNAH AND HER SISTERS and ANNIE HALL. It's ambiguous and pretentious in places. But I wouldn't want Allen to change a

frame - that's what this film is about. It is rightly considered Allen's best work of his recent years. It certainly considered that by me.

BEN: So? What happened? VICKY: One goddamned weekend in Oviedo.

Fun facts

Here's some fun facts about VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA.

Appearing as a guest in the early art gallery scene is Joan Pera. Pera spent decades being the Spanish voice dub for Allen in Spain - doing every Allen onscreen role from 1989's NEW YORK STORIES until the present day, including the Allen screen roles that came after VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA like narrating CAFE SOCIETY and the dubbing in for CRISIS IN SIX SCENES. He is also the Spanish voice for ROWAN ATKINSON. Here's an actor, starred in the Spanish version of CHEERS.

Allen would also single out Spanish director PEDRO ALMODOVAR for praise in his Prince Of Asturias speech. Allen is a huge fan of Almodovar, and appeared in a 2001 documentary about Almodovar. Almodovar, like Allen, likes to work with the same actors, and Allen no doubt took casting cues from Almodovar's work. JAVIER BARDEM, Antonio Banderas and Elena Anaya would all work with Allen. Almodovar worked with PENELOPE CRUZ six times. In fact, Cruz was working with Almodovar on BROKEN PROMISES at the same time as working with Woody Allen on Vicky Cristina Barcelona. And the poor woman was passing messages between the two directors. Just get a room already, Pedro and Woody.

And speaking of getting a room, Bardem and Cruz had crossed paths before, but they fell in love during the course of production of this film. They married a couple of years later, and had two kids.

Outro

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Woody Allen Pages podcast.

Next week - we look at the Woody Allen film that he simply cut in half.