



Sideways: 20th Century Fox

All sun and dimes till someone loses a lie.

Sideways

by Kira-Anne Pelican

Ripening vines, sensuous metaphors and the intoxicated exploits of two long-time friends embarking on a road-trip before one gets hitched, *Sideways* is the bittersweet comedy of two men facing maturity and failing to meet the challenge. With this heartfelt road movie, director Alexander Payne and his screenwriting partner Jim Taylor won a BAFTA for the Best Adapted Screenplay in 2004.

The Oscar-nominated writing partners already had three dark comedies behind them: *Citizen Ruth* (1996), *Election* (1999), *About Schmidt* (2002) and a series of rewrites including *Jurassic Park III*. When Payne's intern came across novelist

Rex Pickett's as-yet unpublished manuscript, he recommended it as a must-read. Agents exchanged phone calls and the option on the novel was secured. Payne's production team set up office, began casting and before long, auteur-led Fox Searchlight signed up for the film. The production was received with resounding critical and commercial success, winning Best Screenplay from all five 'major' critic groups and making over \$109 million worldwide at the box office.

Three-Act Structure

As with the BAFTA-winning scripts that I've looked at so far (*ScriptWriter* issues 28, 29 and 30) *Sideways* is another model of simplicity based around the classic three Act structure. In the first Act, Miles (Paul Giamatti) and Jack (Thomas Hayden

Church) prepare for their road journey. The second Act sees them arriving in wine country and embarking on their emotional journey. The final Act deals with repercussions from the climax and the road back to San Diego. It's interesting to note how faithful the adaptation was to the structure of the original novel; even the original chapters were maintained in naming the script's eight sequences after the days leading up to Jack's wedding.

Act One - Setting off

Middle-school teacher and as-yet-unpublished author Miles, wakes tired and hungover. He's running late to pick up his long-standing friend Jack. They're on the way to the Santa Ynez Valley wine country for a week's trip before Jack gets married. With Jack in tow, Miles makes an

unplanned detour to visit his mother on her birthday. He drops in a card then pops upstairs to help himself to money from her secret stash. Meanwhile, Jack regales Miles' mum with stories from the good old days when he was a successful actor in a well-known Soap. Miles' mother advises Miles to get back together with his ex-wife Victoria. Miles and Jack stay the night, then sneak off first thing next morning before his mother wakes.

Act Two - Arriving in wine country

Miles and Jack descend into the Santa Ynez Valley. Miles explains the fundamentals of wine tasting but Jack is more interested in the drinking. Over dinner, Jack admits his concerns over his impending marriage but Miles encourages him to trust his heart. Jack points out the attractive waitress, Maya (Virginia Madsen), and encourages Miles in her pursuit. Miles insists she's only being friendly for tips but then Maya joins them after dinner and asks about their plans. To Jack's irritation, Miles tells her that they're returning to the hotel to sleep.

The next day, Jack lays his cards on the table. This wasn't just to be a road-trip on which the two friends hang out and taste wine. Jack has an agenda and one that Miles better not screw up. He plans to get laid before he is married that coming weekend.

Miles learns his ex-wife is remarried

The two friends drive on. When they arrive at the next winery, Miles becomes nostalgic about Victoria. In the first turning point, 45 minutes into the script, Jack breaks some big news. Not only is Victoria coming to his wedding but she's remarried and is bringing along her new husband. In a moment of pure farce, Miles grabs a wine bottle from the back seat and bolts down the hill taking huge sips as he runs. Jack chases him and Miles collapses in a heap.

A date with Stephanie and Maya

It's time to introduce a new character: Stephanie (Sandra Oh), the wine-pourer whom Miles and Jack meet at the next wine tasting. She warms to Jack's charms and when Jack discovers she knows Maya, they set up a foursome. Jack warns Miles not to sabotage the night but his

warnings are in vain. The dinner starts well but as Miles becomes drunker, a wave of panic engulfs him as he realises Maya is both available and interested. When Jack and Stephanie start kissing, Miles heads towards the bathroom.

Miles call his ex

The phone beckons. Miles drink-dials and congratulates Victoria on her marriage. She tells him not to call when he's drunk and suggests it might also be best that he doesn't come to Jack's wedding. (The script then contains a couple of fantasy scenes where Miles crosses the river Styx but these didn't make it to the film.) Miles returns to the table, clearly the worse for wear. Jack tells him to pull himself together. The two women suggest going back to their place.

Back to Stephanie's

As the stakes increase, the four head back to Stephanie's cottage where Jack immediately pairs off with Stephanie leaving Maya and Miles alone in the kitchen. They bond over their shared love for wine. Miles tells Maya about his novel and when Maya says she'd like to read his book, he hands her the lengthy manuscript. In a tender moment, Maya reaches out her hand. Miles panics and again rushes off to the bathroom. At the film's midpoint (where couples in romantic comedies traditionally unite for the first time) Miles kisses Maya but the moment, alas, has gone. Maya pulls away and then leaves.

The day after

Jack returns to the motel announcing there's a change of plan: he's spending the day hiking with Stephanie rather than playing golf with Miles as arranged. They bicker and Jack heads off leaving Miles to spend a miserable day alone. Jack joins him later and admits he hasn't told Stephanie he's getting married. Astoundingly, he adds he's thinking about putting his wedding on hold. That night, Jack, Miles, Stephanie and her six-year-old daughter go bowling. Jack plays father figure and Miles watches with disgust. When Jack leaves Miles to take Stephanie home, Miles goes to Maya's restaurant in hope of finding her there. It's her night off so instead, Miles gets drunk alone.

The next day, Jack and Miles play golf and Jack attempts to distract Miles from his increasing anxieties over not having heard back from his agent about news of a publishing deal. Jack and Stephanie set up a double date with Miles and Maya. After a lovely day out, Miles and Maya kiss. Maya pulls him into her apartment and they finally spend the night together.

All is lost

All is going far too well as we approach the end of Act Two. Then Miles lets slip to Maya that Jack is getting married. Maya is furious Miles hadn't told her. He tries to make her understand why but she's unconvinced and wants nothing to do with him. Later at a wine-tasting, in a downward spiral, Miles calls his agent. He learns the publisher has passed on his book. In a bid to get drunk, Miles touses with the wine-pourer, grabs the spit bucket and starts swigging it down.

Act Three - Repercussions

Miles hasn't warned Jack that Stephanie will no doubt have learned about his impending wedding so when she whacks him over the head with her helmet, it comes as a shock. Miles leaves a plaintive, apologetic message for Maya saying he's leaving in the morning, and since his book isn't being published, she shouldn't bother reading it. Jack, meanwhile, badly bruised with a broken nose, decides it's time to return home and settle down.

Another complication

There's no learning for Jack. He flirts with a waitress over dinner and arranges a post-dinner drink. Returning to the motel in the middle of the night, dressed only in his underwear, Jack explains he was caught by the woman's husband in their home. Worse still, Jack left his wallet behind. Inside are the wedding rings. Jack persuades Miles to climb back into the house and grab the rings. Miles reluctantly concedes and escapes just in time with the waitress' husband in pursuit.

The road back

Miles and Jack set off back to San Diego. Jack tells Miles to buckle up then promptly rams Miles' car into a tree all in order to create a car-accident alibi for his

broken nose. Still in disbelief, Miles drops Jack off at his fiancée's and waves goodbye.

Next day at the church, Miles' ex-wife Victoria and her new husband say hello. Miles handles the situation swimmingly, even when Victoria reveals she's pregnant. He decides to give the reception a miss and instead chooses to drink the bottle of wine he's been saving for a special occasion. Miles returns home to find a phone message from Maya. She tells him she loved his book and what does it matter if it's not being published. What matters more is that Miles lived through everything he wrote and that he should continue writing. We're left with the image of Miles plucking up the courage to knock on Maya's door.

Characterisation

At the heart of this script is the maturing relationship between two friends. United by a common history (they shared a room at college) we're left wondering how this unlikely friendship will stand the test of time. There's sensitive Miles, an eternal pessimist who readily defines himself as a loser, and his companion Jack, a good-time guy who breezes through life seemingly without a care in the world.

Here they are again sharing a room, just as if they were back at college. For Jack, that's just what he wants: a chance to get drunk with a friend and get laid one more time before he gets married but for Miles, life has moved on. He's been married, agonised over his divorce and his take on life is far more serious. What worked as a college-day friendship might still amuse Miles and Jack for the odd evening out but we'd be hard-pressed to believe it's going to work when the two are thrown back into close-quarters for an entire week and it is this that brings dramatic tension to the story.

The pair set off on their road trip with good intent but when Jack reveals his agenda at the end of the first Act, tensions start to mount. Jack starts to view Miles as a drag and Miles realises this wasn't the bonding holiday he thought it was going to be. By the Act Two midpoint, Jack warns Miles not to sabotage his plans. The second half of the Act sees a physical split between the pair. Miles spends his days alone whilst Jack



Vine wasting

hangs out with Stephanie. Only when things go very wrong for Jack, when Stephanie learns of his marriage, does he turn back to Miles for help.

The longevity of their friendship kicks in. It's been a real test for Miles when he sees Jack's actions have also pushed Maya away but he's there in Jack's hour of need. Jack is also there and supportive at Miles' low point when Miles loses Maya and hears his novel isn't to be published. On the road back, their friendship is tested one more time. Jack asks Miles to come to his aid when he leaves his wedding rings at the waitress' house. Will this be the final straw for Miles' friendship? Miles comes to Jack's rescue once again. Their friendship has stood the test of time and it is right that Miles is Jack's best man on his wedding day.

Miles

"I'm so insignificant, I can't even kill myself." Poor Miles. A self-defined loser, a born pessimist with a cowardly manner, both dour and self-absorbed, he's not the most immediately lovable protagonist. Yet Payne and Taylor work hard to build our empathy. It's sparked by the script's first scene where Miles is woken tired, hungover and running late to meet Jack. Our empathy is sealed when Miles learns his ex is getting married. In those farcical moments when we see Miles running down the hill, wine bottle in hand, our hearts go out to him and we live the rest of the film vicariously through him. In Miles we have a hero both pathetic and bathetic, a man terrified by the fear of

insignificance and prepared to stoop to the depths of trying to get drunk from a spit-bucket if all else fails.

MILES: "They probably think my book is such a piece of shit that's it's not even worthy of a response. I guess I'll just have to learn to kiss off three years of my life."

A middle-school English teacher by trade, Miles' goal is to have his novel published. Throughout the film we see him waiting for news from his agent. His pain is heartbreaking; he's a struggling author who's given up on himself. Miles' paradox is he doesn't think the novel is any good and is convinced it won't be published; the irony is even greater when we learn his writing is more or less autobiographical. He believes his novel isn't up to scratch and is pretty sure he isn't either.

What Miles needs is to overcome his Internal Obstacle: to put his divorce behind him, to embrace the here and now and to learn to be happy with himself. Only then will he be able to engage emotionally in a new relationship. When Miles first meets Maya, he's consumed by his desire to have his book published and his growing awareness that it's unlikely to happen. Haunted by nostalgia for his ex, Miles barely notices Maya when Jack first points her out and assumes she must be married. When he learns that isn't the case, he's filled with anxiety. Just as things are going well, Miles self-destructively swigs back some more wine and makes the call to his ex.

The midpoint of the novel shows Miles' eyes first opening to the possibility of a

new relationship but he's not yet ready to act. From then on, Miles' need comes into focus. Just as in life when we'll often drive ourselves towards external goals in a bid to avoid emotional situations for which we're not ready, Miles has been doing the same. When Miles finally thinks he's ready to reach out for Maya, he inadvertently lets slip that Jack is getting married at the weekend. Actually Miles still isn't ready for Maya. He has first to confront his demons because it's only when he faces those fears that he'll find the strength to celebrate the life he's already living. He leaves Jack's reception early and breaks open the prized bottle of wine he'd been saving for his tenth wedding anniversary. When he receives Maya's phone message saying she'd like to see him, he's finally ready to embrace the new.

Jack

"I am going to get my nut on this trip, Miles. And you are not going to fuck it up for me with all your depression and anxiety and neg-head downer shit." With his acting career slumping and his marriage dawning, former Soap-star Jack is looking for all the reassurance he can find. Ever the optimist, Jack provides the perfect counterpoint to downbeat, hangdog Miles, both dramatically and comically. Whilst Miles is set on the

truth, however bleak that is, Jack is a fabulist who paints the world as he chooses to see it and if that means describing Miles as a published author or omitting to mention his impending wedding to a new lover, so be it. What's the harm in a little white lie?

It's through Jack's resistance to change that Miles' emotional journey is drawn more poignant by comparison. In the days leading up to his wedding, Jack is given chance after chance to realise the error of his ways. He is nearly caught out by his fiancée and then Stephanie learns of his lies and smacks him over the head. With a broken nose and bruised all over, Jack's still none the wiser and strays once again. Whilst Miles opts to mature, Jack doesn't know any better. His West Coast, frat-house, surfer dialect is a perfect mirror to his immaturity.

JACK: "Cute? She's a fucking hottie. And you almost tell her I'm getting married. What's the matter with you?"

Genre

Even though the majority of its scenes are interiors, *Sideways* is of course a Road Movie. Like other well-known examples of this genre (*Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise* and *Rain Man*) the characters set off on a journey (both literal and emotional) and arrive at their destination in some way

changed by their experiences along the road. Road movies lend themselves to a series of events naturally unfolding along the route, with each new chapter testing the protagonists. The road trip becomes a literary vehicle for emotional change and a framework for adventure.

Imagery

The open, summer road, maturing grapes and the nuances of individual wines lend *Sideways* a rich imagery filled with metaphor. As with all the most effective image-systems, it flows naturally from the subject matter and isn't arbitrarily forced upon it. The wine-tasting trip allows the screenwriters to explore maturity and immaturity, sober moments and drunken farce, the bittersweet and the comic. At the heart of the script is Miles' poignant speech when he compares himself with a Pinot, and at the root of Miles' longing is the day when he'll allow himself to drink his favourite bottle of wine, the 1961 *Cheval Blanc*. When Miles has returned from the open road and completed his emotional journey, he drinks his prized wine alone. As a metaphor for Miles embracing the here and now, the 1961 *Cheval Blanc* has already been established by the script's image-system and thus resonates with the audience.

Sideways

The film's title refers both to the proper way to store a wine bottle and the drunk's angle on the world. *Sideways* also refers to the way Miles has been looking at his life until now: with a particular slant that arguably makes things harder than they need be. In this moving story about the fading memories of an old relationship and the anxieties of starting afresh, Payne and Taylor enable us to invest fully in their characters.

It's a simple script where events naturally unfold and the characters are truthful and three-dimensional. By the time we've learned to love these characters, we discover what the film is really about: finding oneself, living for the here and now, and recognising that no life is insignificant.

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The writer drowns his sorrows.

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