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## Wes Anderson remains devoted to his signature style in "Asteroid City"

Anderson perfects his distinctive voice and aesthetic while examining the art of storytelling in this nested narrative



Its kitschy vintage motifs, carefully selected color palette and deadpan delivery from its actors can make the film feel cliché, especially to long-time fans of Anderson.

Pop. 87 Productions/Focus Features

By [Delaney Hammond](#)

July 13, 2023

Few filmmakers have a style that is as recognizable as Wes Anderson's. His films are characterized by whip-smart humor, vibrant colors and impossibly detailed frames. Anderson's style is so established, in fact, that amateur filmmakers have recently taken to [imitating](#) it on social media.

Anderson's latest film is no exception. In his newest release "Asteroid City," Anderson presents a healthy dose of that signature flair his fans know so well. With the help of a star-studded cast and co-writer Roman Coppola, the filmmaker explores the artistic process and what it means to be a storyteller.

"Asteroid City" opens as a mock black-and-white television special led by a fictional host, played by Bryan Cranston. Cranston introduces the audience to Conrad Earp, the acclaimed playwright of a play called "Asteroid City."

Audiences are then transported to a colorized reenactment of the play. In it, a newly widowed Augie Steenbeck — played by Jason Schwartzman — takes his three daughters and genius son to Asteroid City, the site of an annual youth science camp and home to a famous fallen asteroid.

After an extraterrestrial being lands in the city and steals the asteroid, the family and the rest of the camp's inhabitants are quarantined on the premises. As the family meets and interacts with an eclectic array of supporting characters, they build connections, find romance and mourn the loss of their terminally ill mother.

Unsurprisingly, the film is visually gorgeous. Vibrant, complementary hues that color the play scenes are emphasized by the intermittent black-and-white portions. The costumes, set design and props are perfectly curated, resembling a picture-perfect twentieth-century advertisement.

Repeatedly returning to the documentary-style TV show, the audience also learns about how the play came together. They meet Schubert Green — played by Adrien Brody — the director who is going through a divorce at the time of the play's run. In one scene, Schwartzman's character has to ask Green for advice on how to approach one of Steenbeck's lines.

Structurally, "Asteroid City" is perhaps Anderson's most ambitious film yet. Audiences are transported back and forth between the events of the play and the documentary-style depictions of the play's creation. While the two intertwining worlds are distinguished by their color and by Cranston's narration, it can be hard to become immersed in either one.

This is not helped by the fact that the lines between "actors" and "characters" are often blurred. Scarlett Johansson plays Midge Campbell, a difficult actress in the "Asteroid City" universe, as well as Mercedes Ford, a similarly difficult actress who portrays Midge onstage. Characters in the play deliver lines that reference the script itself. In a scene where Steenbeck places his hand on an iron out of nowhere, Steenbeck tells Campbell he only does it because it was in the script.

Intricate connections between characters and the fictional actors who play them can become confusing and tedious. This — coupled with the film's excessively large cast of minor characters — make it hard to emotionally invest in any of the characters, both inside and outside of the play.

It can be easy to look at the scenes from inside and outside of the play separately, but the film's heart lies in the relationship between the two. The audience becomes familiar with the "actors" and their dispositions, relationships and motivations, which informs how one views their characters in the play. Through this, Anderson gives the audience profound insight into the life and creative process of actors.

Viewers may leave feeling as though this film was a lot like every other Anderson movie they've seen. Stylistically, it is so "Wes Anderson" that it almost feels like a parody of one of his movies, rather than an original. Its kitschy vintage motifs, carefully selected color palette and deadpan delivery from its actors can make the film feel cliché, especially to long-time fans of Anderson.

However, in what is perhaps a diversion from Anderson's other works, "Asteroid City" is best enjoyed when the focus is on its overall concept rather than its individual elements. Viewing the movie as a conversation between a play and its creation — between a story and how it is told, between art and the people who make it — will prove to be rewarding.

Anderson's total commitment to the things that typically define his films is perhaps a part of that. For a story that communicates what it means to create, why wouldn't Anderson indulge in all of the things that define him as a creator?

For those looking for a kitschy, visually appealing two-hour escape, this movie is sure to satisfy. Those looking for something deeper in "Asteroid City" are also likely to find it — if only they know where to look.

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## 'Dear Jack, Dear Louise' captures hearts at the Virginia Theatre Festival

The play tells a story of long distance love in an intimate space



Performed last week in the Helms Theatre as part of the [Virginia Theatre Festival](#), the play follows the romance between Jack Ludwig – a World War II military doctor – and Louise Rabiner, an aspiring actress.

**Virginia Theatre Festival**

By [Delaney Hammond](#)

August 8, 2023

For as long as the two have existed, theater and romance have gone hand in hand. Countless plays and musicals have tackled themes of love in what seems like every way imaginable. At times, it may feel as if every love story that theater can offer has already been told.

However, “Dear Jack, Dear Louise” continued this tradition in a way that was inventive, funny and heartwarming. Performed last week in the Helms Theatre as part of the [Virginia Theatre Festival](#), the play follows the romance between Jack Ludwig, a World War II military doctor, and Louise Rabiner, an aspiring actress.

Jack and Louise's romance is similar to any other on-stage romance, but there's one difference — for most of the play, the two never speak in person. Because Jack is stationed across the world from Louise's native New York, almost all of their communication happens through letters.

To represent this, both Jack, played by Jordan Sobel, and Louise, played by Suzannah Hershkowitz, occupy opposite sides of the stage.

Although it is understood that their conversations are written, the two read their conversations aloud so that it resembles dialogue. Some letters were read in the form of monologues — others are shown as quick, real-time volleys between the two. This choice both keeps the audience engaged and allows them to feel the chemistry between the two characters develop.

Though they share a stage, neither of the two look at the other for most of the show. This helps the audience maintain that they're physically separated without sacrificing the intimacy of the relationship.

One of the most interesting staging elements of the show was the stage's alleyway configuration. Instead of a traditional proscenium, "Dear Jack, Dear Louise" positions the action on a strip in the middle of the room, with rows of audience members facing the middle of the stage on either side.

The Helms Theatre — located on Grounds in the Drama Education Building — holds between 150 and 200 people. Combined with the alleyway setup, the coziness of the black box theater gave the show an element of closeness that allowed audiences to be swept away by the story.

"It's sort of an epic story told across a mass in terms of where these people are, but we're doing it in this really intimate and really unique spatial configuration," Sobel said. "I think it adds a level of intimacy and a level of theatricality to the piece. I think that's a lot of fun, and a very idiosyncratic aspect of the show, which is really exciting."

Jack and Louise's exchanges throughout the play are genuine, heartwarming and often very funny. After not hearing from Jack for several weeks, Louise passive aggressively tries to get his attention. In another scene, Jack writes letters to his overbearing relatives before they meet Louise. Scenes like these kept the audiences smiling throughout the show.

Because it takes place during World War II, "Dear Jack, Dear Louise" also explores the atrocities of war. Jack frequently describes the devastating injuries he has to treat and the grueling training he and the rest of the men must go through.

Later, the audience watches him escape an air raid as sounds of bombs thunder through the theater. Scenes like these completely immerse viewers in the world of the play and create an intense tension that is contrasted by the more heartfelt parts of the play.

Since the show takes place in the 20th century, one might worry that it isn't relevant to modern audiences. However, the love story at the heart of the play is one that will resonate with audiences of all kinds.

"The play is really all about hope and longing, and what it means to reach out for another human being in a time of uncertainty," Sobel said. "It's about how having a human connection can be the strongest beacon for hope and life."

"Dear Jack, Dear Louise" is one of three shows presented this year by the Virginia Theatre Festival, or VTF. Formerly called the Heritage Theatre Festival, VTF has brought professional theater to Charlottesville each summer since 1974.

Earlier this summer, the Festival put on a dazzling production of Cabaret. From August 3 to August 6, the festival presented its final show, "An Evening with Yolanda Rabun."

Lydia Newman, the social media specialist for VTF, sees the festival as an opportunity to showcase both great theater and the incredible theatrical spaces the University has to offer.

“We have a lot of great assets in the theater department here, but I don't think a lot of people know that,” Newman said. “Post-COVID, I think at first it was hard to get audiences back here – but this summer, it's been really cool to see people realize that this is a professional theater.”

When one feels isolated, art is one of the most powerful tools for fostering connection. “Dear Jack, Dear Louise” achieved this seamlessly – by showing that love knows no distance, and that connection can be found anywhere.

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## “Their World As Big As They Made It: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance” keeps the vibrant era alive on Grounds

The Special Collections Library showcases an intriguing collection of primary sources



Visitors walking into the Library's exhibition room will find a brightly lit space filled with seemingly countless artifacts. [Photo by Alison Pike | The Cavalier Daily](#)

By [Delaney Hammond](#)

September 12, 2023

In the summer of 1919, America was [wrought](#) with racial violence. As Black troops returned from World War I, white mobs [attacked](#) Black people in a host of major cities across the country. What grew out of the horrors of that summer was a literary, artistic and political movement unlike any other — the Harlem Renaissance.

At the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, a curated collection of images, art and documents paints a picture of the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. The library's newest exhibition, “Their World As Big As They Made It: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance” brings the life and ardor of the Harlem Renaissance to

## Grounds.

According to Krystal Appiah, the head of collections development at Special Collections, their existing collections were ripe with material to illustrate the movement. The existing collection included novels, poetry collections and anthologies from the period that illustrate the vast literary and artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance.

"As we dug in our catalog and searched the stacks, we were pleased to find original issues of the three major periodicals — 'The Crisis,' 'The Messenger' and 'Opportunity' — which allowed us to tell a story about the political and ideological environment as well," Appiah said.

Visitors walking into the library's exhibition room will find a brightly lit space filled with seemingly countless artifacts. Relics are organized by the historical figure or event they pertain to — each one signified by a colorful sign.

Each window is graced by a vibrant, translucent flag that boasts an excerpt from a famous Harlem Renaissance writer or activist. One flag features a red and blue reprint of the cover of Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues," accompanied by a quote from the poem.

To English professor Lisa Woolfork — an artist featured in the exhibit — witnessing the primary sources that drove the Harlem Renaissance makes such history tangible and real. Woolfork notes the profundity of seeing such iconic works and moments materialized in person.

"To be able to see the first edition of W.E.B. Dubois's 'The Souls of Black Folk' ... that's it," Woolfork said. "This is why the excitement of primary sources cannot be underestimated, and it makes me feel really excited that we have access to so much of Black literary history."

In addition to documents of days gone by, the exhibition also features new works from Black artists that are in conversation with Harlem Renaissance literature. In addition to Woolfork, there are contributions by Black artists of today — Abreale Hopkins, Kemi Layeni, Tobiah Mundt and Valencia Robin. Each piece is displayed next to the poem from the Harlem Renaissance that inspired it.

One piece titled "Three Dark Girls, Loved," by Woolfork, was based on a 1922 poem by Gwendolyn B. Bennett entitled "To A Dark Girl." In the poem, Bennett praises a young Black girl for her dark features, while acknowledging the sadness that is held within them.

"I love you for your brownness, / And the rounded darkness of your breast," Bennett writes to her subject.

According to Woolfork, these two lines at the beginning of the poem served as the main inspiration for her piece.

"['Three Dark Girls, Loved'] is a study of three Black girls — looking at them frozen in a state of innocence, in a state before anti-blackness would be something which they had to recognize, when they were in the joyous throes of childhood, where their imaginations are allowed to stretch and extend and grow," Woolfork said.

Woolfork's portrait features a fabric outline of three faceless young Black girls in frilly, lace-lined dresses. The group is posed over a backdrop of a repeating polaroid, presumably the one the fabric rendition is modeled after.

A black-and-white fabric with bouncing, shaded parabolas surrounds the portrait. Woolfork's choice fabric is from a line [created](#) by designer e bond and inspired by Black women writers — the one featured in the piece was based on Zora Neale Hurston, an esteemed Harlem Renaissance novelist.

By including new pieces by contemporary artists, the exhibition emphasizes the ways in which the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance is still alive today.

In addition to showcasing the creative forces of the Harlem Renaissance, the exhibition also highlights the immense political activism that shaped the period.

"People often associate music and literary works with the Harlem Renaissance," Appiah said. "I hope audiences learn how much political activism was also occurring during this era...Black Americans were lobbying for a federal anti-lynching bill, fighting segregation in schools and job sites and creating vibrant neighborhoods full of culture and Black-owned businesses."

“Their World As Big As They Made It: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance” [opens](#) Sept. 13 with an event featuring food, live music and gallery talks.

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