

A private conversation with:

Wes Anderson
The magical eye

by Roberta Valent

With “The Grand Budapest Hotel”, the Texan director once again proposes a fantastical tale populated by quirky characters, where the visionary esthetic is fueled by the contrast with reality

His style of dress evokes the style of his films, giving him a nostalgic air: velvet suits, tweed jackets, the ubiquitous Clark's, vintage uniforms that on the screen instantly embody the spirit of adventure of his characters. Unique individuals with a baggage of fantastical stories, whose only desire is to fit into the system while at the same time freeing themselves of all stereotypes. This is the cinematic signature of Wes Anderson. Born in Texas and now living between Paris and New York, he is one of the few directors whose incomparable style who can handle surrealism; one whose first film, “Rushmore”, co-written with another Texas native, Owen Wilson, was listed by Martin Scorsese among his ten favorites of all time. And if the esteem of his colleagues weren't enough, his trophy case is quite impressive: winner of the Silver Bear at the latest Berlin Film Festival with “The Grand Budapest Hotel”, the Leone d'Oro at Venice for “The Darjeeling Express”, as well as Oscar nominations for “The Royal Tenenbaums”, “Fantastic Mr. Fox” and “Moonrise Kingdom”. A voyager and a dandy (he uses intercontinental travel as a source of inspiration), a lover of French cinema (Renoir, Truffaut, Malle, Maurice Pialat and Arnaud Desplechin), aficionado of taxidermy and goat cheese, Wes Anderson hits the Italian big screen in April with “The Grand Budapest Hotel”, a film inspired by the works of Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, the early films of Billy Wilder and Ernst Lubitsch (“To Be Or Not To Be”, “The Shop Around the Corner”). And by Alfred Hitchcock. “It's bordering on plagiarism”, he says, smiling. “There's a scene I practically stole from ‘The Torn Curtain’. I hope his fans will forgive me. As for Stefan Zweig,” he continues, “he's one of the most elegant and intelligent writers I've ever read. I loved his first novel, ‘Beware of Pity’, and I've devoured everything he's written, including ‘The Post Office Girl’. In fact ‘The Grand Budapest Hotel’ has a lot of elements drawn from both books. Two characters in the film represent Zweig himself, the ones played by Tom Wilkinson and Jude Law. But there's also something of him in M. Gustave H, the main character played by Ralph Fiennes. I thought about the period he lived in, his friendship with Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schnitzler, and I wanted to capture his spirit most of all, not just adapt his writing. In many of his novels Zweig tells the story through a narrator, an enigmatic figure that unveils a mystery, which is irresistible for any director.” Anderson's films are set in alternative worlds very similar to ours, but distorted by a magnifying glass that alters sentiments and situations. The “site” is an integral part of all his films, like the submarine in “The Aquatic Adventures of Steve Zissou”, the train in “The Darjeeling Express”, and now a hotel. “In my films, the script exists first. Then there's the research to find the right place to shoot. Traveling around, I collect ideas that often modify the script. What I mean is, before starting filming, I always fix it first, because if a story requires a certain degree of reality to be plausible, then that reality must be part of the story. For example, in the case of ‘The Grand Budapest Hotel’, the script called for a 1930s hotel, once glorious, that has gone into full decline by the 1960s. After coming back from our scouting trips, the hotel had become communist, not just from an architectural standpoint, but ideologically as well. Sometimes I'm inspired by fictional people, other times by real ones with whom I have a deep connection based on shared experience. I love creating settings where my characters live their own lives and fulfill their own dreams. Many of them are inspired by my childhood, by the idea of solitude as space and fellowship as family.” The costumes in his films are also essential for

constructing the characters, invariably denoting a desire for cleanliness and organization, a simple but refined elegance, a love of hierarchies with rules that anyone outside that world must learn and respect. “Yves Saint Laurent used to say that fashion passes, but style is eternal. In my films there’s a very specific esthetic. In ‘Rushmore’ it’s the preppy style, the Ivy League look, oxford shirts and striped ties. In ‘The Royal Tennenbaums’ it’s red Adidas sweatsuits. In ‘The Aquatic Adventures of Steve Zissou’ it’s Adidas sneakers and beanies, woolen watch caps that became fashionable all over the world. Then there are the plastic eyeglasses, sweatbands and vintage Vuitton luggage in ‘Darjeeling’, pajamas in ‘Fantastic Mr. Fox’, the nostalgia for Boy Scout uniforms and Davy Crockett raccoon-skin caps in ‘Moonrise Kingdom’. In ‘The Grand Budapest Hotel’, Milena Canonero, who I think is one of the most creative costume designers in the business, if not the greatest, has captured the spirit of the fictional Republic of Zubrowka not only in the costumes, but in the general look that incorporates the philosophy of the characters and the intellectual spirit of the period. She did it by taking inspiration from photographers of the time, like Man Ray and George Hurrell, and from painters like Klimt, Tamara de Lempicka and George Grosz. And then from real people of the period as well as imaginary characters created by artists.” The cast is full of friends and long-time collaborators like Bill Murray, Jason Schwartzman, Owen Wilson, Tilda Swinton, Edward Norton, Willem Dafoe, Adrien Brody and Harvey Keitel. “I often work with the same actors because they’re my favorites. Many of them know my method. There are no trailers, their costumes are left in their rooms each night, no one dresses them. There are no drivers that take them from the hotel to the set, we all eat together, we become a team, a family. We work intensely every day and then in the evening we have the famous cast dinner, which is always prepared by my Italian friend who’s an amazing chef. His only defect – he won’t work on Saturdays.” “The Grand Budapest Hotel” is Anderson’s first period film. “While I was scouting at the Library of Congress in Washington, I discovered the collection of photochrom prints. Millions of photos from all over the world, shot between 1895 and 1910. It’s like a Google Earth from the beginning of the century. They’re photos of urban landscapes and panoramas, and if there are people they’re always in groups. They’re very interesting images, they show us a time in our history that has disappeared, whose landscapes are now metropolises. In a certain sense it’s sad. Many of those places don’t exist anymore, the world has changed. And from the story those photos tell, for the worse. I’m a nostalgic person, it’s true, but I don’t pine for the past. I’ve lived the last 15 years in Europe, I know what it means to coexist with the history of our forebears. History for me is an adventure. When I walk down the street and discover something I’d never seen before, I’m happy. Our history is life itself, past, present and future.”