

Exquisite Dreams is Heaven Sent

What Dreams May Come

- **Starring:** Robin Williams, Annabella Sciorra and Cuba Gooding Jr.
- **Director:** Vincent Ward
- **Rating:** PG-13 for emotional and visual intensity.
1 hour, 46 minutes
- **Grade:** B+
- **The Verdict:** Bring every box of tissues you can find

By Eleanor Ringel, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

It's payback time.

Having sat stony faced and unmoved through "Simon Birch" I now find myself choking up at the mere memory of certain scenes from the new fantasy drama "What Dreams May Come."

Robin Williams plays a doctor who, near the beginning of the movie, is killed in an automobile accident. Although the bulk of the movie takes place after he enters the afterlife, the film's true focus is on matters of life, not death. Especially on how the ways we live in the here and now can affect the hereafter.

Which, according to director Vincent Ward, is a glorious visual feast. As in the little-seen 1984 picture "Made in Heaven", this movie says we create our own private heaven. Thus, for Williams, whose grieving widow (Annabella Sciorra) is a painter, heaven is a radiant smorgasbord of painterly images – the impressionists, the Hudson Valley School, Maxwell Parrish. There's even a populist dash of Disney's "Fantasia". Other heavens resemble Venice in the Renaissance, a court masque or sumptuous opera set.

Hell also figures in the film. Its gates are a graveyard of wrecked ships: its imagery is borrowed from Bosch and Dore.

But hell isn't other people, as Satre insisted in "No Exit." Rather, hell is the nightmare prison of anguished self-involvement and depression. "Hell isn't fear and pain" says one character. "The real hell is your life gone wrong."

"What Dreams May Come" is a hybrid – a tear-jerker phantasmagoria. The title is from Shakespeare, the plot has echoes of Greek mythology (Orpheus and Eurydice) and the look is as extravagantly fantastic as anything Ken Russell or Terry Gilliam has ever dreamed up. But the tone and theology are pure Hollywood, closer to "Ghost" than "The Seventh Seal".

Yet the emotional issues are direct and powerful. The death of children. The death of a spouse. Even the pain of putting an elderly pet to sleep. We are reminded again and again that simplistic is sometimes just a hairbreadth away from primal.

Williams is effective in the central role. He rarely lapses into his smarmy side, and he has been lucky in his supporting cast – Sciorra, Cuba Gooding Jr., Max von Sydow. Still, he lacks emotional complexity, which, unfortunately, mirrors the film's own lack thereof.

That said, I wouldn't have missed "What Dreams May Come" for anything. My advice: check your cynicism at the door and bring a box of Kleenex. Better bring two.