



What Dreams May Come

A Film Review by James Berardinelli

States, 1998 | U.S. Release Date: 10/2/98 (wide) | Running Length: 1:48
MPAA Classification: PG-13 (Mature themes, images of hell, mild profanity)
Theatrical Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1

Cast: Robin Williams, Annabella Sciorra, Cuba Gooding Jr., Max von Sydow
Director: Vincent Ward
Producers: Barnet Bain, Stephen Simon
Screenplay: Ron Bass based on the novel by Richard Matheson
U.S. Distributor: Polygram

If I wanted to be cynical about this film, I could say that the moral is not to get out of the car and help at the scene of an accident. That's what gets Chris Nielsen (Robin Williams) killed. Of course, I'm not giving anything away here, since this happens at the beginning of the movie, after a short prologue that offers glimpses of Chris' marriage to his wife, Annie (Annabella Sciorra). In more than a decade of bliss, there was only one dark period. Four years ago, Chris and Annie's two children, Marie (Jessica Brooks) and Ian (Josh Paddock), died in a car crash and now, tragically, Chris has joined them. One moment, he's trying to help someone trapped in a wreck; the next, he's making his way into the light.

As it turns out, the afterlife isn't what Chris expected. To begin with, he has a guide - an old mentor named Albert (Cuba Gooding Jr.). He spends some time wandering around on Earth - looking in at his funeral, checking on his grief-stricken wife, and generally seeing how the world is progressing without him. Eventually, when he realizes that his continued ghostly presence is causing Annie pain, he quits this realm and heads into heaven, a place of colors, light, and beauty. But Chris is not content. Even the realization that he can again meet with his children is not enough. Then an event occurs that threatens to sever his connection with Annie forever.

What Dreams May Come has the sensibilities of an art film placed into a big-budget feature with an A-list cast. Although it is undeniably a tear-jerker, it's probably not mainstream enough to enthrall audiences and assure a big return at the box office. It is arguably too offbeat. The storyline, which has Chris relishing the serenity of heaven before taking a trip through hell, is compelling, even if the ending is a little too cute. Part of the reason the movie works is that the characters are likable. Most of us would love to have the kind of relationship that Chris and Annie enjoyed, so it's not hard to root for them to somehow find each other again, even with the chasm of death dividing them. Also, the production design is truly amazing, coming in second only to [Dark City](#) for the most visually arresting picture of the year (with the upcoming [Pleasantville](#) a close third).

The presence of Max von Sydow immediately conjures up associations with the work of legendary film maker Ingmar Bergman, and, indeed, there's something almost Bergman-esque about *What Dreams May Come*. This film is about life, death, and the connection between the two - themes that Bergman explored more than once. Granted, von Sydow was a lot younger when he appeared in *The Seventh Seal*, but the link is there. However, it's worth mentioning that had Bergman made this film, the ending would not have been as hopelessly crowd-pleasing.

Watching *What Dreams May Come* is like observing a series of paintings come to life. Director Vincent Ward's view of heaven is surreal and spectacular, with special effects enhancing everything from the subtle greens of the mosses and grass to the crimsons, violets, oranges, and blues of the flower petals. It's a place where thought determines reality. Chris thinks in terms of a painting, so everything in his world is wet with fresh paint. His pallet is one of vibrant hues and magnificent vistas. Later, as we enter other

compartments of the afterlife, we see images of celestial cities and angels, all of which will be familiar in style to anyone who has studied classical art. Likewise, hell is a grim, dark place, with the color leeched out almost to the point where everything is monochromatic. The sight of hundreds of lost souls capsizing Chris' boat is a chilling moment.

Apparently, Robin Williams has decided to devote a lion's share of his time to serious movies. Although not as good here as in [Good Will Hunting](#), Williams is affable enough to capture our sympathy. His comic persona is completely under control; there's little evidence of the actor who occasionally goes berserk in front of the cameras. The real standout is Annabella Sciorra, who has the difficult job of acting as if no one is there when Williams is standing right next to her (since he's dead, she can't see him). She makes Annie's grief palpable. Cuba Gooding Jr. is effective in a supporting role, and it's always nice to see von Sydow, with or without Bergman.

Many movies have offered representations of heaven and hell, but few with as much conviction and creativity as *What Dreams May Come*. The plot, which focuses on the sacrifices one man will make for true love, is neither complicated nor original, but, bolstered by the director's incredible visual sense, it becomes an affecting piece of drama. While not as sickly sweet as *Ghost*, *What Dreams May Come* shares an important trait with the Demi Moore/Patrick Swayze melodrama - namely, that love does not end with death. Those who embrace this belief and don't mind a somewhat artistic approach are likely to enjoy Vincent Ward's latest movie.

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