



# What Dreams May Come

By "Nathaniel R. Atcheson"

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Director: Vincent Ward

Cast: Robin Williams, Cuba Gooding, Jr. Annabella Sciorra, Max von Sydow

Screenplay: Ron Bass

Producers: Barnet Bain, Stephen Simon

Runtime: 108 min | US Distribution: PolyGram

Rated PG-13: thematic elements, disturbing images/language

I've seen films that deal with death and afterlife, but I don't think I've seen any that conquer the subject with such unrelenting determination as Vincent Ward's *What Dreams May Come*. It's so refreshing to see a Hollywood production that succeeds by ignoring all the standard conventions and clichés of the genre. This film is profound and deeply interesting -- it handles disturbing subjects with unflinching sincerity. And though it has its roots in many other works -- from Dante's *Inferno* all the way up to the films of Bergman -- it still manages originality and uniqueness.

But these aren't the elements that will stick with you, for *What Dreams May Come* is one of the most visually astounding films I've ever seen. It's a wealth of truly beautiful sets and special effects, seamless and visionary images of things that can't exist in our world. That's what makes this such a memorable film experience -- it takes you places you have never been, and shows you things you can't see anywhere else. In a time when most films don't exhibit the even lowest degree of creativity, here is a film that registers as art and serves its purpose both in sensation and perception. Your eyes and your mind will feed on all that Ward's film has to offer.

At the same time, however, the film's flaws are almost as obvious as its virtues. It suffers from a terribly disjointed narrative -- the chronology is difficult to understand, and there's not always a strong sense of momentum. As a whole, the film may not have you feeling absorbed as much as you may feel trapped -- at times, it's so visually arresting that it seems like you're living the nightmare. This is a positive attribute to a point, but this film comes inches away from being intolerably depressing. I'll elaborate on all this later. The film stars Robin Williams as Chris Neilsen, a doctor who, at the beginning of the film, meets his true love, Annie (Annabella Sciorra). They get married and have two children, Ian (Josh Paddock) and Marie (Jessica Brooks). The family is shattered one day when the kids are killed in a car accident. The film then jumps ahead four years, when Chris, too, is killed in another car accident, leaving Annie without anyone in her life.

Chris suddenly finds himself watching over Annie as she grieves for him. His status is explained to him by a guide named Albert (Cuba Gooding, Jr.). Soon, Chris allows himself to proceed into Heaven, where his world is created with the paint that his wife used to paint the pictures he loved when he was alive. Soon, however, it turns out Annie's soul is in trouble, and Chris must journey through the afterlife to find and save her.

I've left a lot out, and that's because there are many subplots, and many flashbacks that show small portions of Chris' and Annie's life before and after their kids get killed. Because it deals with such morose themes, *What Dreams May Come* is inescapably dark, even in the bright and wonderfully colorful world that Chris first creates for himself. There's always an underlying sense of malaise and frustration, an element that makes us feel like nothing is ever right, even when the characters seem at least momentarily placated.

The biggest problem with the film, however, is the lack of fluency in the narrative. This isn't Ward's fault -- in fact, it's hard to say if there is any one person at fault. The way the film is constructed lends itself to this

kind of storytelling technique -- flashbacks and the like -- and, since it explains a world with which none of us are familiar, it's necessary for Chris to have a guide to explain him everything (Dante had Virgil, didn't he?). I don't mind that this explanation is necessary, but the first forty-five minutes of the film are spent watching Chris reject his placement in Heaven. Then, all the way up until the end, the film exists on two timelines -- one in the present tense, showing Chris on his journey, and the other showing Chris and his family when they were alive. The result is a story that never quite convinces us that it's actually happening - the whole thing feels too much like a wicked nightmare.

And, if you stop and think about it, it's all pretty absurd. Ron Bass' script isn't bad; the characterizations are solid, and the themes are well-established. But, on a technical level, it seems a bit sloppy: I could poke holes through its logic all day, although I'm not sure where that would get me. In addition, the film isn't as moving as I was expecting; I cared about the characters and their respective fates, but none of the dramatic elements in the film really took hold of me the way I was hoping they would.

Okay, so it has some big problems. Overall, though, *What Dreams May Come* is a satisfying picture, even if it misses a few opportunities for sound logic and effective drama. Vincent Ward is a truly gifted artist, and this film is proof of my statement: there are moments in *What Dreams May Come* that are literally breathtaking, moments that are so visually immersive that you won't even be able to blink, let alone look away from the screen. There are little things that Ward repeatedly uses that add depth to the scenery -- lots of running water and reflections, concrete stairways, walls that stretch up to seemingly infinite heights. It's the kind of imaginative world that we so rarely get to see in films.

The acting is superb; Williams, who is often a difficult man for me to watch, is wonderful here (although a bit heavy on the pathos). Gooding, Jr. is a demanding screen presence, and is very good in the role of the Explainer. Max von Sydow, who plays another guide whom Chris meets halfway into his journey, is perfect for his role. Most interesting, however, is Annabella Sciorra, who delivers her best performance (and, hopefully, her breakthrough role) as Annie. Sciorra's work is complex and shaded both emotionally and physically; she spends a lot of the film crying, but she manages to make what could have been a token part into a real character.

As flawed as it is, I have to recommend *What Dreams May Come* enthusiastically, simply because it really is an effective film. True, it could have been much better, and maybe it goes a bit overboard in its attempts to make us feel bad for the characters, but I can't think of a film in recent history that is more visually amazing. Vincent Ward has created a film so beautifully original that I doubt it could be ignored or forgotten by anyone who sees it. It's also a film that latches to its themes and pursuits with admirable dignity and persistence, and at least partially succeeds. Nowadays, it's nice to see anything that qualifies as art, but something done with as much conviction as this is a film to be cherished, in spite of its flaws.

\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
(7/10, B)

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