

The curse of the self-involved Manhattanite

The Curse of the Jade Scorpion, written and directed by Woody Allen

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Woody Allen's *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, a *film noir* crime caper set in 1940s Manhattan, is a film of few merits, despite the striking cinematography of Zhao Fei and remarkable period reconstruction of production designer Santo Loquato.

C.W. Briggs (Allen) is an investigator for a troubled insurance firm that has engaged efficiency expert Betty Ann Fitzgerald (Helen Hunt) to modernize the company. The firm is full of veteran investigators who solve cases in their own way, foremost among them being the womanizing C.W., who relies on intuition and a network of well-paid and well-treated snitches. Fitzgerald or Fitz has little tolerance for C.W. and is hell-bent on outsourcing the detective department. Fitz, who is secretly having an affair with the married company owner (Dan Aykroyd), is not only apparently immune to but repulsed by C.W.'s old-style charms.

At an office birthday party at the famed Rainbow Room, Fitz and C.W. are put under a spell by a professional hypnotist, Voltan Polgar, (David Ogden Stiers). For the audience's amusement Voltan has the couple fall in love. He also, however, surreptitiously programs them to respond to a command word, which will be later used in post-hypnotic suggestion to turn C.W. (and later Fitz) into unwitting jewel thieves.

At each crime scene the clues incriminate C.W., who had designed the elaborate security systems at the various estates. C.W. is jailed, only to be freed by *femme fatale* Laura Kensington (Charlize Theron), whose family was one of those burglarized. Kensington has repeatedly thrown herself at C.W. Fitz, the nonsense "career woman," who is a soft touch for bad love affairs (she nearly commits suicide over the Aykroyd character), begins to see C.W.'s "deeper"

side. The uncovering of the mechanism for the robberies is an almost non-event and the movie rushes forward to unite the arch-antagonists in a predictable fashion.

With the exception of a few amusing lines and a few actors who are enjoyable to watch, the movie is bland as a whole, with little comic timing or momentum. The entire film hinges on Allen's performance as the gumshoe with the snappy patter, who unbelievably (at age 65!) wows all the young beauties. With the exception of Allen and Hunt, most of the characters, including Theron, Aykroyd and most disappointingly Wallace Shawn, have virtually nothing to do. Hunt is always straining and overexerting to bring to life a stillborn moment or to make natural a self-conscious line.

Allen's script is generally amateurish and devoid of much life or feeling. On the most obvious comedic level, the plot could have been embellished with twists that organically arise from some potentially funny situations. The robbery scenes, some of the most carelessly crafted, cried out for a comic (or suspenseful) elaboration. Opportunities for comedy were missed from beginning to end. From the point of view of the acting talent utilized, the stunning cinematography, the aesthetically rich production efforts, as well as Allen's excellent jazz selections, the project seems incredibly wasteful.

Allen's lazy, thoughtless approach to the creation of the light-comedy, a highly taxing genre, is highlighted in a comment from the film's production notes: "I've never been hypnotized, and there was no specific reason to do it; it was just a funny premise, and the rest is whatever spun out from that."

One reviewer interprets these remarks to signify that “Allen now makes pictures out of habit, rather than desire or ambition, and the results often feel more like rough drafts than finished products.... There used to be considerable focus and magnetism to Allen’s comic perceptions, a unique, overriding sense of purpose.”

How is one to explain such flabbiness, amateurishness and lack of purpose from someone like Allen? It is painful to watch him as the romantic lead doing his timeworn routine. It reveals an artist who is embarrassingly out of touch with his audience and himself. There is apparently no one in Allen’s coterie who will point out to him that his nervous schlemiel is by now tired and threadbare and that he is no longer writing many funny lines. Although none of Allen’s films have been fully formed artistically, he is capable of wit and insight, self-criticism and social criticism. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) was one of the most important Reagan-era films. *Husbands and Wives* (1992) included excellent performances and delivered some hard blows to the Manhattan semi-liberal, semi-intellectual middle class. *Celebrity* (1998) was a biting Hollywood industry satire that created some waves.

Allen has always had a tendency to be soft on himself and, more importantly, to avoid the more troubling aspects of life and history. Great pains were taken in *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* to recreate costumes and locations. Not so with the characters who are irritatingly modern or merely caricatures of movie types.

The level of egocentric obliviousness reflected in the film is not primarily an individual issue, although Allen’s well-publicized personal difficulties seemed to suggest a particularly self-involved and childish personality. The degree of artistic and social insularity the writer-director exhibits in this film says something about the evolution of the well-heeled Manhattan milieu with which the vast majority of his films have been preoccupied. Many of these people are now mesmerized by their own wealth and stature. Why should they listen to advice or criticism, much less examine the social contrasts or pay attention to signs of impending crisis? Allen has absorbed some of this. With *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, he now finds himself in a self-hypnotic trance unmindful of a world that demands much more of an artist of his caliber.



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