

Woody Allen's latest

Hollywood Ending, written and directed by Woody Allen

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Hollywood Ending, Woody Allen's thirty-fourth film as writer/director, is an anti-Hollywood satire revolving around an apparently washed-up New York City filmmaker.

Val Waxman (Allen) is an Oscar-winning director who has fallen on hard times. His artistic temperament, accentuated by extreme neurosis and hypochondria, has caused several film projects to crash, rendering him unemployable. Reduced to shooting commercials in the Canadian tundra, Waxman is offered a last chance to salvage his career.

Val's ex-wife and former collaborator, Ellie (Téa Leoni), is now engaged to Hal (Treat Williams), the head of Galaxy Pictures in Hollywood. Despite fierce misgivings expressed by Hal and other executives, Ellie gets Val hired to direct the studio's new film project about New York City—*The City That Never Sleeps*.

On the eve of the shooting, Val develops psychosomatic blindness. Several people, including Val's agent (Mark Rydell), a film student translator for his Chinese cinematographer and later, Ellie, are co-opted to assist in Val's attempt to hide his blindness from Hal and the studio.

After various tired hijinks, Val's new film turns out to be a disaster and bombs in the US, but becomes a hit in France (presumably referring to the long-standing joke about the popularity of certain American cultural oddities in that country). Ellie leaves Hal and the vacuous Hollywood crowd. Val reconciles with an alienated son. Val and Ellie reunite and move to Paris, where the filmmaker's artistic gifts will be more appreciated.

Hollywood Ending has a few amusing moments, but perhaps a cinematic work was not the proper vehicle for the movie's script, whose scenes consist largely of Allen one-liners and physical slapstick. Stand-up

comedy might have been a better choice of medium.

The dramatic definition of the relationships between the characters and plot development in general have been sacrificed for Allen's punch-lines. For example, when Allen's Val, plagued by lack of money and oblivion as an artist, must decide to work in a milieu he despises and for a big-shot who has stolen the woman he still loves, he delivers a comic routine rather than what should have been emotionally-charged soul searching: "He's a philistine, she's a quisling, they have a religious conflict ... I would kill for this job, but the people I'd like to kill are offering me a job."

Making matters worse, the film's comic timing is more off than on. In fact, Téa Leoni provides whatever cohesiveness exists in the film. As Ellie, she is unique in avoiding the pitfall of attempting to overact or to match Allen's shtick.

Allen's films generally have comically self-deprecating autobiographical elements, but in *Hollywood Ending* these elements exude an unpleasant whiff of self-pity and desperation. One reviewer correctly lamented that "where once his presence in his films he wrote and directed was a good part of what made them unforgettable, his appearance in 'Hollywood Ending' makes parts of it close to unwatchable."

Without identifying the cause of the film's overall unpleasantness, another reviewer described the film as containing hints "of self-doubting autobiography" while one questioned "whether this is art imitating life or life imitating art." Several reviewers linked Allen's apparent decline as a filmmaker and his recent rash of flat and badly-made movies to his notorious family scandal 10 years ago.

When Allen's character Val wonders, at a pitch meeting for *The City That Never Sleeps*, "why the

country got so stupid suddenly,” it is perhaps somewhat clearer whom Allen blames for his recent lack of success.

Another aspect of the work that makes an unfavorable impression is Allen’s unconvincing prowess with women about a third of his age—no less than three in the current movie. Recurring quips about his sexual virility appear out of place and delusional.

All in all, this is another weak and essentially pointless film, the latest in a series. Allen obviously has the right and ability to turn out a film a year, but one would hope that he might step back at some point, perhaps take a break from filmmaking, and provide himself anew with compelling reasons for his continued activity. His apparent lack of any objective conception about himself and his work is one of the most disturbing aspects of his annual film production. It may very well be that *Hollywood Ending*, like *Deconstructing Harry* and others, is seen by its author as an exercise in self-criticism. Hardly. The filmmaker cannot seem to suppress his self-pity and self-aggrandizement.

At the center of *Hollywood Ending*, and this is a familiar theme, is Allen’s artificial construction of a dichotomy between the supposed cultural apex, New York City, and the cultural wasteland, Los Angeles and the film industry. This brings to mind the parallels between this film and Robert Altman’s *The Player*, another anti-Hollywood film. Allen is approximately the same age that Altman was when he made his film. While the latter’s work was a relatively sharp-eyed look at film industry machinations and Machiavellianism, Allen’s movie offers no worked-out insights about either Hollywood types or the travails of being an artist under the thumb of such types. (George Hamilton strutting around with a golf club does not even qualify as a type.)

Allen fails to build a solid argument for his long-held contention that the two cities—or two cultures—exist on vastly different intellectual planes. Where is the evidence of that? What has become of New York’s liberal artistic intelligentsia? When was the last time it produced a major work or series of works, or, more importantly, took a courageous and difficult stand that electrified large sections of the population? This layer has turned politically and socially to the right. It largely supported Rudolph Giuliani, the former mayor, in his

war against the city’s working class and the poor, and his relentless campaign against democratic rights and artistic freedom. It has not spoken out against the brutal and sordid militarism of the Bush administration. It is this social shift, more than his personal catastrophes, which probably figures most prominently in Allen’s general decline.

The vitality of some of Allen’s works, such as *Annie Hall*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Husbands and Wives*, and even *Celebrity* (in parts) stemmed from their comically-laced critique of various social issues and layers, with the camera turned on the filmmaker’s own milieu. He is capable of skewering the self-importance and self-involvement of that milieu. As the latter has become more politically conservative and isolated from wider layers of the population, so have Allen’s cinematic efforts become increasingly limp.



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