

Woody Allen's Scoop: The decline is nothing to gloat about

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Scoop, written and directed by Woody Allen

"I was born into the Hebrew persuasion, but when I got older I converted to narcissism," asserts Woody Allen's character, Sid Waterman, in the filmmaker's latest comic-suspense movie, *Scoop*. An amusing line, one of the very few in the film, it also hints at an obvious problem—far more deep-going than Allen himself realizes.

The tragedy is that this gifted comic has been entirely overtaken by narcissism, on sad display in *Scoop*, the second of three films scheduled to be made in London. In an interview, Allen describes the latter city as being financially and artistically accommodating to him. *Scoop* follows last year's *Match Point* and exhibits many of the same weaknesses, particularly its carelessness and implausibility.

The film opens with a memorial service eulogizing Joe Strombel (Ian McShane), a Fleet Street journalist whose sudden death supposedly leaves a void in the world of intrepid reporting. Known for chasing a story to the end, Strombel crosses back and forth between the netherworld and the material world after getting a scoop on the Grim Reaper's barge.

Strombel has learned that Peter Lyman (Hugh Jackman), a wealthy, debonair aristocrat, is, in fact, the "Tarot Card" killer of short, brown-haired prostitutes. As a participant at one of the cheesy magic shows staged by Sid Waterman (a.k.a. The Great Splendini, played by Allen), Sondra Pransky (Scarlett Johansson), an American journalism student visiting friends in London, finds herself contacted by the deceased Strombel, who wants her to get the goods on Lyman. Sondra enlists a reluctant Sid, and the unlikely duo make their way into Lyman's world, pretending to be rich and related, as father and daughter.

There are yawning gaps in the narrative. Why the cunning Strombel, able to cheat death itself, picks the ditsy Sondra to be his live proxy in following the "scoop of a lifetime" is unclear. Why, for her part, does Sondra want to work with an irresolute and aging nebbish? Why does Peter, so admired in London society and with so much to lose in both his public and secret lives, easily open up to the incongruous

pair?

Why does Sondra consider herself to have the makings of a serious journalist? Besides a lack of investigative skills, she seems incapable of resisting the urge to jump into bed with her subjects, who, apart from Peter, include a famous filmmaker with whom a sexual tussle leaves no time for an interview. Even with the invaluable help of a ghostly mentor, she continually places herself in harm's way for no good reason.

There are 'whys' and 'how comes' throughout the film. Plot discrepancies and character inconsistencies abound. But the truth is that the entire film is crafted—if one can use that word in this case—as a device to showcase Allen. There is no other reason even to include the character of Sid in the movie. In fact, the film comes to a sloppy, abrupt end as soon as Allen's Sid disappears from the screen.

What was affectionate nostalgia for third-rate comics and performers in *Broadway Danny Rose* becomes tedious in *Scoop*, with Allen delivering tired and remarkably unfunny one-liners, such as: "I bought my first Rubens [Reubens] with poker winnings ... Not a painting, a sandwich." Or: "This guy is a serial killer like I play for the New York Jets." Annoyingly, Sid stammers and fidgets, repeating to all and sundry: "You're a beautiful human and a credit to your race."

Summing up the film's cheaply pessimistic tone is Sid's gag, "I see the glass half full, but with poison." Although Allen has thankfully stepped aside as the romantic lead, he could not resist including an ode to the seductive power of the filmmaker, in a scene with Johansson and famed director Mike Tinsley (Kevin McNally).

Allen's use, or more accurately, under use, of a pool of talented actors, many of them British, is largely a travesty. Having no substantive role to play, Jackman, an Australian, as Peter, merely enhances the scenery with his charm and good looks. Other performers, including John Standing, Julian Glover, Fenella Woolgar and Charles Dance, appear only for brief moments, so brief that they have been labeled the film's "incredible bench strength." Allen is fortunate

that, unlike himself, these actors don't, as he describes it, "get into the business of ego."

He is also fortunate that his cinematographer for *Match Point*, Remi Adefarasin, agreed to sign onto *Scoop*, lending the film at least the semblance of professionalism.

With no essential purposefulness or inner cohesion, *Scoop* is unamusing and disconnected. It is a predictable and shallow saga, unfolding in a haphazard sequence of events.

Allen's continued artistic decline, almost disintegration, continues. *Small Time Crooks* (2000), *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001), *Hollywood Ending* (2002), *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), *Match Point* (2005) and now *Scoop* are very, very poor films by any objective standard.

Although never a towering artistic figure, Allen at one point had something to contribute. His stand-up routines in the 1960s had bite and wit. For some 15 years, from *Annie Hall* (1977) to *Husbands and Wives* (1992), his films offered some amusing insight into the doings of liberal, quasi-intellectual circles; if not as a whole, at least in part, the films had content and even dramatic weight. A serious falling off occurred in the mid-1990s, and the new century has only seen that intensify.

One doesn't enjoy writing this again and again. There is nothing to gloat about in such a deterioration. It has a semi-tragic quality.

Allen has nothing to say at present. So he diverts himself and his audience in trivial ways. Why, for example, this newfound love affair with the upper crust in England? For the moment, the filmmaker has turned his back on his favorite New York City milieu. Certainly, he had exhausted some situations and characters (perhaps a decade ago!), but did he ever truly get to the bottom of things in Manhattan?

Has he, for example, ever grasped the extraordinary social polarization and the dramatic lurch to the right that have taken place in upper middle class, erstwhile liberal, sections of New York society? This has so much to do with the increasing barrenness and peculiarity of his films, but there is no indication that he ever came to terms with this process.

Having not understood what occurred in his beloved native city, Allen takes himself off to London, even less prepared. He proceeds to indulge in a fantasized view of a British high society (in *Match Point* and the new film) that is cultured, humane and attracted to 'regular' people, like Sondra and Sid.

In *Scoop*, whether Peter Lyman is a homicidal maniac or not thoroughly recedes into the background. What stands out is how beautifully he lives: a family estate exquisitely adorned; a townhouse with incredible art and a collection of priceless musical instruments; an idyllic country home on a private lake. These are lovingly and sensuously presented to the viewer. Murderer or no, Peter is a demi-god! The film's

score reinforces this prejudice with a melodious blend of *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker Suite* and *Peer Gynt*.

One senses, above all, as Allen-Waterman delivers his thoroughly time-battered jokes, that the filmmaker has run out of steam in any attempt to make sense of the world. Towards the film's beginning he proclaims that "if more people had a sense or humor, we would not be in the state we're in!" It hardly gets more banal or trite.

Or maybe it does. In a 2005 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Allen, asked why there was not a hint about what happened September 11, 2001, in his recent films, replied: "[I]t's because I don't find political subjects or topical world events profound enough to get interested in them myself as an artist. As a filmmaker, I'm not interested in 9/11. Because, if you look at the big picture, the long view of things, it's too small, history overwhelms it.

"The history of the world is like: he kills me, I kill him. Only with different cosmetics and different castings: so in 2001 some fanatics killed some Americans, and now some Americans are killing some Iraqis. And in my childhood, some Nazis killed Jews. And now, some Jewish people and some Palestinians are killing each other. Political questions, if you go back thousands of years, are ephemeral, not important. History is the same thing over and over again."

What can one say? No one obliges the artist to understand with scientific precision the great laws of history. However, such a trivial, evasive and lazy view as Allen advances pretty well excludes him from having much of anything important to say to anyone.

About the Russian writer Andrey Biely (*St. Petersburg*), who complained that world-historic events such as the October Revolution of 1917 interfered with his art, Trotsky commented scornfully: "Andrey Biely accuses our Soviet epoch of being 'terrible for writers who feel the call to large monumental canvases.' He, the monumentalist is dragged, don't you see, 'to the arena of everydaydom,' to the painting of 'bon-bon boxes'! Can one, may I ask, turn reality and logic more roughly on their heads? ..."

It is not for the critic to write off a filmmaker. With comments like those above and films like *Scoop*, Allen, who was never a Biely to begin with, is writing himself off. It's unfortunate, but the least one can do is to point out the elementary truth.



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