

Allentown: "Scoop," "The Ant Bully," and "Monster House"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 01 August 2006 23:03



SCOOP

If you're not a Woody Allen fan, it's easy to see how you could be annoyed by his latest comedy, *Scoop*.

Scarlett Johansson plays Sondra Pransky, an American journalism student hoping to land her first big story in England. Allen plays Sid Waterman, a third-rate magician working under the stage name Splendini. One night, Sondra finds herself the audience volunteer at one of Splendini's performances, and during her brief time spent in the magician's trick closet, she is visited by the spirit of recently-deceased journalist Joe Strombel (Ian McShane). Strombel gives her the scoop of a lifetime - that a local series of serial killings may be the work of aristocrat Peter Lyman (Hugh Jackman) - and, with Splendini's aid, Sondra quickly sets off to uncover the truth by assuming a false identity and enticing the potential murderer into falling in love with her.

For those who don't care for Allen's work - and even a few of us who *do* - that description alone sets off a few red flags. The forced whimsy of the set-up is distracting enough, but it seems that we've been here with Allen before; the plot is basically a hybrid of

Manhattan Murder Mystery

and

Match Point

, and really, are any of us eager to see

another

movie where Woody pairs himself against an actress young enough to be his granddaughter?

And even if you grant *Scoop* it's familiarity-bordering-on-libel, the filmmaking itself is rather aimless and meandering - especially in the first half-hour - and it doesn't seem that a lot of fresh comic thought went into the material. As with the plot, a lot of jokes and set-pieces here have been recycled numerous times already - while nosing around Lyman's secret music room, Allen's Splendini engages in a routine that's practically a direct lift from a similar scene in *Small Times Crooks*

- and Allen's expository dialogue has become quite clunky; at times, the film feels a bit like it was thrown together haphazardly over a long weekend.

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There won't be any way to convince those who don't like Allen that they should give *Scoop* a try, and so far, I haven't done much to convince the rest of you, either. But the sweet surprise of Allen's latest movie is that after its shaky opening, the familiar elements of the film become *delightfully* familiar, and filmmaking that seemed, at first, lazy is really just relaxed and confident. There may not be a lot of laughs in *Scoop*, but it has great charm and a definite style, and Allen's partnership with Johansson turns out, against all expectation, to be positively inspired.

Female characters in Allen's films are continually exasperated with the ones that Woody Allen plays. Wives and ex-wives and longtime lovers will chide him for his peevishness and his paranoia, and "Woody"'s banter with them generally carries with it an air of comic resignation; these women may be annoyed, but they've known him a long time, and know he's not going to change. In *Scoop*, Sondra and Splendini engage in this same sort of repartee, but with an important distinction: Sondra not only has no romantic attraction to Splendini (for which we give thanks) but just *met* him, so her exasperation doesn't come from being fed up with the usual "Woody" tics, and leads to a welcome change of tone.

When, in *Scoop*, Sondra is impatient with her crime-solving partner, there's genuine temper and bewilderment behind Johansson's comedic rants - she could be continually asking him, "Are you for *real?*" - and the change is good for Allen, who seems newly energized opposite Johansson. The duo's verbal duels have a scrappy wit that transcends their familiarity; we may have heard these wisecracks and put-downs before, but in *Scoop*, they have brand-new bite.

There's also plenty of bite in the scenes between Johansson and Jackman. When the actress paired off against Jonathan Rhys-Myers in *Match Point*, the duo helped form something previously thought unthinkable - a *sexy* Woody Allen movie - and her partnership with Jackman, while inherently comedic, provides *Scoop* with some of that film's romantic allure; you find yourself really hoping that Lyman isn't the killer, just so he and Sondra can continue their juicy flirtation.

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It's a good thing that the Sondra-and-Splendini scenes and the Sondra-and-Lyman scenes play as well as they do, because with the exception of occasional appearances by that ghostly newshound, they're the only major characters to be found in *Scoop* - the film could have benefited from a few more foils. It could also have benefited from a more complex storyline and a less ragtag structure; too many scenes appear to have no point, or merely reiterate a point made previously.

But *Scoop* is filled with so many incidental pleasures that you don't much mind it's lack of major ones, and for this Woody Allen fan, at least, the sight of Scarlett Johansson shaking some new life into the writer/director, and new life into his *work*, is enough. It's been 20 years since *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and we Allen aficionados have pretty much given up hope on getting another masterpiece - we're now more than content with a really good time.



THE ANT BULLY

In *The Ant Bully*, a child is magically shrunk down to ant size so he can learn to appreciate the insects he's been terrorizing, and while this computer-animated extravaganza is (expectedly) great to look at, it's almost criminally bland. Filled with the usual life lessons about Respecting Others and Working Together that are commonplace in family entertainments,

The Ant Bully

(for adult viewers, at least) is a yawn; the impressive vocal cast (Nicolas Cage, Julia Roberts, Meryl Streep, Paul Giamatti, Lily Tomlin) is given nothing funny to say or do, and the whole thing could be easily shrugged off if it weren't for the leading character's continuous shrieking - watching the film is like being trapped with the young Macaulay Culkin in full,

Home Alone

"Aaaaaahhh!!!" mode.

The Ant Bully

would be boring if it wasn't so obnoxious.

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MONSTER HOUSE

By contrast, I had a blast at *Monster House*, mostly because it isn't trying to turn its audience into better people. The film concerns a trio of pre-teens who discover that the haunted house across the street is *alive*, and it doesn't spoon-feed its audience any morals or pretend that it's doing anything but wasting your time in terrifically enjoyable fashion;

House

smart and quick and, best of all,

funny

Monster House

's cleverness keeps popping up in the oddest of places, and the

kids are snappy and sarcastic in a refreshingly believable, occasionally mean-spirited way.

("Are you guys mentally challenged?" one of the kids asks her new acquaintances. "If so, I'm certified to teach you baseball.") As computer-animated marvels become more commonplace, ones that reveal actual

wit

appear to be on the wane, and if faced with the choice of

The Ant Bully

or

Monster House

, I'll easily take the one where the lead tries to cover

his nervousness by explaining, "It's just puberty. I'm having lots and lots of puberty."