



TO ROME WITH LOVE

After Woody Allen's rather staggering success with *Midnight in Paris* – personal-best box-office, the man's first Academy Award in 25 years – I guess it was inevitable that critics, as a whole, would greet the filmmaker's follow-up project with a collective "meh." And that's certainly happened with Woody's new

To Rome with Love

. (Not that it matters, but the comedy is currently sitting with a "45-percent fresh" rating – i.e., "not fresh at all" – at the review aggregator RottenTomatoes.com.)

But I'd argue that the movie's less generous critics have picked entirely the wrong picture to be indifferent toward, because the *To Rome with Love* that I saw was sensational – charming, hilarious, imaginative, and, in its offhanded way, enormously adventurous. As Woody's latest is composed of a quartet of frothy comic vignettes set in the Eternal City, all of them reminiscent of the short fictions he occasionally writes for

The New Yorker

, it's easy to see how the film is being perceived as slight. Yet that description, while somewhat accurate, doesn't begin to suggest the masterly finesse and intelligence that Woody and his tremendous cast demonstrate here. If

Midnight in Paris

remains the writer/director's finest achievement of the past two decades,

To Rome with Love

easily lands in the top five, and with more than 20 releases to choose from, that's hardly something to sniff at.

The least of the movie's four intertwined stories – "least," in this case, meaning "merely" sweet, clever, and laugh-out-loud funny – casts Alessandro Tiberi and Alessandra Mastronardi as rural newlyweds who become accidentally separated in the big city. A mistaken-identity slapstick performed entirely in Italian, the piece finds the bride cavorting with a heavy-set movie star (Antonio Albanese) and the groom forced into having a fiery prostitute (Penélope Cruz) pose as his wife, and this segment is, at first glance, *To Rome with Love's* most featherweight one. Yet it's acted with exceptional panache – Cruz, speaking fluent Italian, is at her most intoxicatingly luscious – and the narrative winds up making unexpectedly profound statements about personal freedom and the necessity of romantic risk without even a hint of hectoring.

Viva Italia!: "To Rome with Love," "Savages," and "Katy Perry: Part of Me"

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Also presented exclusively with subtitles, the vignette that finds a dull, middle-aged man suddenly, and without explanation, turned into an overnight media sensation is even better, which is surprising primarily because the man in question is played by everyone's favorite Italian punching bag, Roberto Benigni. The frequently unbearable Oscar winner, though, is absolutely outstanding here. As reporters, interviewers, and autograph hounds obsess over his character's breakfast and underwear preferences, Benigni grounds the fantastical goings-on in realism without sacrificing humor; his perplexed irritation morphs into resignation, then entitlement, and finally desperation, and the actor's inspired, low-key clowning makes the progression wholly believable and dryly hysterical.

Woody himself appears in the film as a retired, much-maligned opera director who finds a budding star in his daughter's future father-in-law (Fabio Armiliato), a mortician who's also an exquisite natural tenor ... but only in the shower. Complications, and a sudsy staging of *Pagliacci* ensue, and beginning with our first image of Woody sitting on a plane with screen wife Judy Davis – their last cinematic face-off, in *Deconstructing Harry*, being comic-nightmare perfection – I can't imagine how I could've loved this segment more. From the presence of the wondrous Alison Pill to the onslaught of priceless dialogue to the glorious vocals of Armiliato, this farcical vignette is a thorough joy and, incredibly, one that's somehow topped by *To Rome with Love*'s fourth narrative offering.

In it, Alec Baldwin plays a noted architect who decides to take a stroll around the Italian neighborhood he resided in as a young man, and winds up befriendng a twentysomething architecture student played by Jesse Eisenberg. What we slowly realize, though – and what the older man realizes far earlier – is that Eisenberg actually *is* Baldwin. Like Owen Wilson being magically transported to 1920s Paris, Baldwin is granted an unexplained trek to his own past, where he counsels Eisenberg on the fruitlessness of his infatuation with a neurotic, name-dropping actress (a fabulously spiky Ellen Page). And while it runs under a half hour, this segment actually proves just as inventive and ingenious as *Midnight in Paris*; it's a riotous time-travel romp that's also a wise meditation on youthful indiscretions, and a surprisingly touching celebration of the entirety of one's life experience. There wasn't a single storyline or character in *To Rome with Love* that I wasn't eager to return to, and with this last segment as the movie's *crème de la crème*, I'm overjoyed that Woody Allen has – for the first time this millennium – delivered two films in a

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row that I'll be returning to again and again and again.



SAVAGES

As I'm sure no one needs to be told, the recent, ridiculous heat and humidity has made the cineplex an ideal two-hour getaway spot. But while the air conditioning was working just fine at my Friday-morning screening of *Savages*, I'm not sure it made a bit of difference; Oliver Stone's vicious, exuberant tale of warring marijuana dealers was so steamy and blazingly alive that my return to the oppressive summertime temps was almost a relief. Narrated by Blake Lively's Ophelia – a character who goes by the nickname "O" and, as she informs us, might not survive to the end credits – the movie finds her two live-in lovers (Taylor Kitsch and Aaron Johnson) fighting to keep their weed empire from the clutches of Salma Hayek's dastardly entrepreneur, and it's an almost obscene amount of fun. Some of Stone's set pieces here, among them the early torture of Shea Whigham's shady lawyer and a nail-biter involving a potentially fatal freeway encounter, rank with the most exciting scenes the director has shot in ages, and even the inevitable climactic shoot-out boasts considerable gravitas;

Savages

is the rare violent thriller in which the gunfights and stabbings and decapitations are legitimately *meaningful*

. (It's also the rare movie involving a *ménage à trois*

in which the relationship is treated without judgment, and presented without the predicted crises; at no point do we get the expected scene in which Kitsch and Johnson come to blows over which one Lively loves more.) With its evocative, sun-drenched cinematography by Dan Mindel and frequent narrative wit, the movie is seedy and sleazy and terrifically entertaining, and you can have a great time arguing whether it's Benicio Del Toro's amoral enforcer or John Travolta's corrupt DEA agent who's the film's bigger (and more enjoyable) scumbag. And then Salma Hayek shows up to remind you what true evil – to say nothing of true desperation, cunning, and maternal fierceness – really looks like. From start to finish,

Savages

is a baked beauty.

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KATY PERRY: PART OF ME

Part documentary, part concert film, and all candy-colored pop fantasia, *Katy Perry: Part of Me* is, like its star/subject, endearing and high-spirited and aggressively determined to win you over. For the most part, I succumbed. The sequences detailing Katy's exhaustion – particularly during the crumbling of her marriage to Russell Brand, who makes a few wary appearances here – are our only respites from the movie's incessant cheer, and unfortunately, it's hard to be terribly moved by them; breakdowns caught on camera are still, as she's certainly aware, happening *on camera*

, and consequently feel a little forced. (And directors Dan Cutforth's and Jane Lipsitz's presentation of these breakdowns is *seriously*

forced.) But the concert snippets, especially during Perry's mad costume changes in "Hot N Cold," have a fizzy, infectious charm, and there are plenty of diverting moments throughout, with the home-movie footage of four-year-old Katy belting "God Bless America" a particular delight.

All in all, I had a surprisingly not-bad time at

Katy Perry: Part of Me –

just like I had a surprisingly not-bad time at last year's

Justin Bieber: Never Say Never

– yet it was still a bit of a struggle to keep my eyes open for the whole thing. No matter one's personal level of Katy Perry fanaticism, I can't imagine who wouldn't be eventually worn out by a 100-minute sugar rush.

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