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SPIDER-MAN

Your enjoyment of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* adaptation will, I think, boil down to just how realistic you want your special effects to be. I imagine that even those who *haven't* yet seen the film – and there must be at least three or four of you out there – will have seen the previews of our hero as he leaps across buildings and whooshes through downtown Manhattan, and they're all most obviously computer-generated effects; I have friends who refuse to see the film because of how bored they already are of CGI in movies.

And, admittedly, it is disconcerting when these artificial wonders are first presented, especially when used in tandem with shots of actual human beings in the frame. But amazingly, I grew to really like the surreal look of the movie's action scenes. Not being hindered by the natural limitations of the human body, this computer-generated Spider-Man and his nemesis, The Green Goblin, are allowed to move *insanely* fast and pull off acrobatic feats that the makers of something like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* could only dream of; in a superhero epic such as this, realism should take a back seat to wild flights of fancy anyway, and the chaotic battles in *Spider-Man* have all the giddy, comic-book explosiveness you could hope for. So, no, the film's effects aren't very "realistic." They do, however, inspire wonder – as did the so-called "unrealistic" effects in 2000's *X-Men* – and help make this *Spider-Man* a pre-summer blockbuster that's actually worth standing in line for.

This first *Spider-Man* feature is mostly an introductory piece, explaining how the introverted, brilliant young Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire), having been bitten by a radioactive spider, acquires the talents to become a famed superhero, all the while pining for Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst), the beautiful girl-next-door, and saving Manhattankind from The Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), who is the father of his best friend, Harry (James Franco). As setup installments go, the script, by David Koepp, is all right, but his dialogue is typically clunky; it's often difficult to determine whether the lines are homages to the mock-serious dialogue in many comic books or merely bad writing. Thankfully, though, director Sam Raimi gives the movie visual life that easily

makes up for the screenplay's lack of dimension. There are some tantalizingly lovely shots with the camera swooping through traffic and up the sides of buildings, and he stages Peter learning how to control his newfound powers with humor and confidence; this is Raimi's best post-*Evil Dead* mainstream work.

While Tobey Maguire is too reticent a performer when in his Spidey garb – the role seems a natural for co-star James Franco, who's also mighty good in his role as Harry – he nails Peter's insecurity and gradually awakening sense of duty, and he's got chemistry to spare with Kirsten Dunst, so ebullient and charming a performer that she practically walks off with the movie. Willem Dafoe isn't quite the nasty fun you hope he'll be, though he pulls off one Jeckyl-and-Hyde scene admirably, but supporting-actor laurels are stolen by J.K. Simmons, a hoot as *Daily Bugle* editor J. Jonah Jameson. Though occasionally overscaled and often overwritten, this *Spider-Man* is a zippy, entertaining spectacle, and one that, based on the cast, characters, and our ever-improving technology, might provide even more beguiling Spider-Man stories in years to come.

HOLLYWOOD ENDING

I bow to no one in my admiration of Woody Allen, but I think it's safe to say that nearly everything that's wrong with his latest comedy, *Hollywood Ending*, is pure Woody. He plays Val Waxman, a once-lauded, Oscar-winning director whose career has hit the skids, but who gets the opportunity for a big comeback with a new picture his studio-exec ex-wife (Tea Leoni) lands him. As the first day of shooting approaches, however, Val's neuroses render him psychosomatically blind, so he and his agent (Mark Rydell) must find a way to get through the project without anyone discovering the director's mental malady. Silly as the concept sounds, in Woody's hands this should be the stuff of rib-tickling farce, to say nothing of the avowed New Yorker's chance to skewer Hollywood in all its blockbuster-minded inanity. Yet despite a few fine performances, almost nothing in *Hollywood Ending* comes off as it should, and the problems start with Woody's casting of himself in the leading role.

Woody Allen has never been a subtle actor, but here, his high-pitched, comic exasperation does little more than underline the movie's many implausibilities. When blind, his Val stares ahead vacantly, takes tiny little shuffling steps with his arms moderately outstretched, continually tumbles and knocks things over, faces the wrong way when speaking to someone directly – it's an Acting Blind performance of such one-note obviousness that you can't believe the other characters in the movie are so stupid as to fall for it. (*Hollywood Ending* will be Woody's first work to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival, and with his portrayal reminiscent of nothing so much as Jerry Lewis at his more tiresome, the French just might adore it.) But beyond his uninspired characterization, there's an added downside to Woody's presence here: When Val is being guided around by those in-the-know about his condition, slowly being walked from room to room, Woody appears to be a very feeble being indeed. (He suddenly looks a decade older than his real-life 66 years.) Not only do you feel immediate, inappropriate sadness for him, but you have far too much time to consider whether this frail little hypochondriac could *really* have been married to Tea Leoni, have Debra Messing as a live-in girlfriend, and have Tiffani Thiessen flagrantly proposition him in her underwear. The age disparity between Woody and his celluloid lovers has been a debate since 1979's *Manhattan*, but this is the first time I found myself hoping that the women onscreen wouldn't physically *hurt* him.

Hollywood Ending isn't without its pleasures. Foremost among them is Tea Leoni, who provides the film with welcome dry-comic wit, and who, at one point, looks so gorgeous in a burgundy gown that for three minutes I forgot to listen to what the characters onscreen said. Barney Cheng is terrifically endearing as the translator to Val's Chinese-speaking cinematographer, and Treat Williams brings some gusto to his role as a beleaguered studio head. But they can't compensate for Woody's constant cribbing from his other, better films (*Stardust Memories* in particular), the laziness of his plotting (Val regains his eyesight practically as an afterthought), the overall lethary of the presentation, and the fact that, a mere day after seeing it, you're hard-pressed to remember even one really funny line of dialogue. No doubt he'll bounce back, but those who eagerly await each new Woody Allen film will likely find this to be one unhappy *Ending*.