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ANYTHING ELSE

As a lifelong fan of Woody Allen's cinematic oeuvre, the last five years have been rather painful. Sure, *Small Time Crooks* was a lot of fun and Sean Penn delivered a truly inspired performance in *Sweet & Lowdown*, but *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion*, though intermittently amusing, felt pretty stale, and *Celebrity* and last year's *Hollywood Ending* were just plain awful. (Part of being a true fan includes admitting when your heroes fail, and feeling somewhat heartbroken when they do.)

So, for the die-hards, the arrival of Woody's latest, *Anything Else*, is very nearly a cause for celebration. It's not a great movie – I'd say it's two-thirds great – but it's certainly a step back in the right direction. After the forced "wackiness" of his last two works, which felt like comedic short-story ideas that couldn't survive feature-length presentation, Woody again deals with subjects he knows best – neuroses, instability, the impossibility of "perfect" love – and what results is both deeply funny and an intriguing flip-side to Woody's Greatest Hits. Those who don't already appreciate his work might not get much out of *Anything Else* – he's not going to win over any new admirers – but this new film feels like a gift to the faithful, a re-working, and oftentimes re-thinking, of what makes a Woody Allen movie A Woody Allen Movie.

The film has, often derisively, been called a twentysomething *Annie Hall*, yet that's not far from the truth; *Anything Else* concerns a young comedy writer (Jason Biggs, who, as a Woody surrogate, isn't quite on a par with *Bullets Over Broadway* 's John Cusack but far outclasses Kenneth Branagh in *Celebrity*) trying to manage both his flailing career and his impossibly neurotic girlfriend (Christina Ricci). Yet the key to the film's inspiration is in the role Woody himself plays, that of an elder writer who tells his protégé that psychoanalysis is rubbish, that California is Mecca, and that owning a an arsenal of loaded weapons is the best way to get through life. Is this Woody Allen talking? This flip-flop – with Woody himself playing devil's advocate to "the Woody character" – is enough to make fans giggle, but it's just a sampling of the movie's many, many treats: Ricci giving the high-comic performance of her career and looking jaw-droppingly luscious; Stockard Channing, as Ricci's controlling mother, investing her hysterically funny portrayal with real poignancy; Woody viciously attacking a bully's car with a tire iron; the stunning cinematography of Darius Khondji, who helps make this the best-looking Woody movie since 1986's *Hannah & Her Sisters* . Woody doesn't appear to be *fully* back yet – his timing is still shaky, and you often can't tell if the mentor's one-liners aren't funny or aren't *meant* to be funny – but *Anything Else* is easily the *auteur* 's best offering since *Deconstructing Harry* , and a joyous occasion for the devoted.

SECONDHAND LIONS

I suppose Disney's winning streak had to end eventually. After a slew of superior releases that rank among 2003's best – *Holes*, *Finding Nemo*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Freaky Friday* – the studio now presents Tim McCanlies' *Secondhand Lions*, a work of saccharine obviousness that trashes the contributions of its first-rate cast. In the film, a teenaged Haley Joel Osment is placed in the care of his gun-totin' uncles (Robert Duvall and Michael Caine), a cranky duo who, supposedly, have millions in stolen loot stashed on their property. Yet while it's always a pleasure to see Osment, Duvall, and Caine, even when they're as ill-directed as they are here, I can't fathom why the movie wasn't animated instead; its characters and situations, meant to be heartfelt and sincere, are so cartoonish that the addition of Ariel or Simba wouldn't be at all inconsistent. And for anyone wondering how *Secondhand Lions* plays for its intended youthful audience, here are just a few of the movie's Life Lessons for the kids: Arabs are scary; stealing is acceptable if you're stealing from Arabs; lions are cuddly; fistfights are funny; and shotguns are *really* funny, especially if you're shooting at traveling salesmen or Arabs. Where would our children be without these pearls of wisdom?

COLD CREEK MANOR

Mike Figgis' *Cold Creek Manor* is like 1991's *Cape Fear* remake minus Scorsese and De Niro (although both films *do* feature Juliette Lewis). In other words, it's *Cape Fear* without the suspense, psychological complexity, and flamboyantly scary lead performance. (It has also inspired the year's most misleading trailers; almost everyone I've talked to thinks the movie is a haunted-house flick.) When Dennis Quaid, Sharon Stone, and their two kids leave their upscale New York home for the dilapidated comforts of a country manse, they encounter a slimeball (Stephen Dorff) who lived in the house and wants it back, and the movie derails right then and there, because Mr. Dorff, buffed and oiled beyond belief, isn't the least bit intimidating. His "dangerous" posturing makes him seem like a greaser in a touring company of *West Side Story*, and Dorff's veiled threats and insinuations about Quaid's manliness, meant to be disturbing, are borderline laughable; icy Sharon Stone is more terrifying than this little pipsqueak. Without a

sufficient villain,
Cold Creek Manor
is a long yawn, clunky in its exposition – “Look! A stained-glass window! Think anyone’s gonna crash through it?” “Look! A pony! Think it’s gonna die?” – and devoid of a single engaging moment; it might not be the horror movie the ads promise, but it sure
feels
like death.

CABIN FEVER

For *true* scares, your best current bet is *Cabin Fever*, where the sloppiness and amateurishness actually work in its favor. Near a remote woodland cabin, a flesh-eating virus begins infesting the locals – and a group of horny collegians – after its first victim falls into the area’s water supply. That’s it. *Cabin Fever*
is as crude and simplistic as could be, with the requisite bad acting and tin dialogue, but director/co-writer Eli Roth plays entertaining games with the rules of fright flicks, harkening back to the days before
Halloween
and
Friday the 13th
and their ilk
established
those rules. In
Cabin Fever
, the sweet young virgins may not survive (and may even die unusually early), the most loutish of the group may not be infected, and the decrepit racist at the general store may be the sanest person onscreen; Roth smartly plays into your awareness of horror clichés and continually catches you off-guard. (He also surprises in small, funny ways, like the occasional inclusion of Angelo Badalamenti’s haunting chords, or the presentation of a legitimately hilarious mid-film sequence involving a stoned cop.)
Cabin Fever
is nothing more than a cheap, cheesy little goosebump-inducer, but it achieves its limited goals with more finesse than you might expect, and proves yet again that, even in the hoariest of genres, a big budget is no substitute for imagination and talent.