Jaded and Grumpy

EVEN BY THE GENEROUS criteria generally applied to summer films, last summer was a particularly disappointing season. Vacation movies target young audiences with young themes, and, as a result, they emerge half-baked from the minds of young, or wannabe young, filmmakers. Okay, I plead *nolo contendere* to the obvious charge of senescent grumpiness, but read another paragraph or two, just in case I may have a point to help put my remarks about Woody Allen's latest offering into a wider cultural context.

The new film-school graduates cut their visual teeth on MTV and computer games. They revel in the optical capabilities of their medium, and so do their audiences. (Students I interview for the film program at Boston College inevitably want to get right to the digital editing equipment. Literature, history and art strike many as useless hurdles to get over before they can get into "film.") In addition, this generation of younger filmmakers inhabits a dot-com universe of quick fortunes made from brilliant marketing of disposable products. Make a box office killing the first weekend and then move on to the next potential blockbuster.

Drop 66-year-old Woody Allen into this milieu and "grumpy" seems not only understandable but admirable. After turning out roughly a film a year for the past 35 years, and presumably being financially secure by this time, Allen has earned freedom from both reviewers and audiences. As a result, he has become both a solipsist and an artistic reactionary. That is, he makes films for himself, not the mass market. Rather than push the limits of the new technology, like his market-conscious younger colleagues, he has progressively retreated into his vast mental archive of film history. Woody Allen doing computer-generated robots would be as likely as George Lucas filming Strindberg on a bare stage. Over the past 15 years, Woody Allen has examined the classic Hollywood genre films, often presenting his own quirky comment on them. Reactionary creativity. I like that. Perhaps we are brothers in grumpiness.

Woody Allen, David Ogden Stiers and Helen Hunt star in Mr. Allen's film "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion."

The Curse of the Jade Scorpion, his latest, follows this pattern. It pays tribute to the glorious screwball comedies and hardboiled detective yarns of the late 1930's and early 1940's, but with a decidedly postmodern wink at deconstructing them. The campy title, sounding much like a Saturday matinee serial, hints at his devious, satirical purposes. Allen looks back with misty-eyed nostalgia on these lovable old films of his childhood, but he also sees them with the clear-eyed, adult perspective of a major film artist. He's like a relative at an Irish wake, whose highly embellished stories of the deceased sparkle with affection and humor and yet at the same time carry the sting of unflattering truth: "Ah sure, he was a fine man...when he was sober." What Allen tries to accomplish then is quite a bit more subtle than appears on the surface of this ostensibly minor comic work. It's comedy, but more than that. It's also a very pointed reflection on two classic Hollywood film genres.

In the time-honored tradition, screwball comedy set a glamorous couple at each other's throats. They think they hate each other, but the audience knows that they will eventually realize that they are in love. In "Scorpion" Allen casts himself as the romantic lead, ace insurance investigator C. W. Briggs. No Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy or Humphrey Bogart he.

Briggs's romantic partner is Betty Ann Fitzgerald, or Fitz (Helen Hunt), who can surely stand in the company of Carole Lombard, Katherine Hepburn or Lauren Bacall, but she is different. Like them, she is quick-witted, independent and spunky, but beneath her stiff tailored business suit dwells a modern liberated woman. She graduated from Vassar and joined the firm as an efficiency expert, a shrewd, tough executive who might efficiency Briggs's job into oblivion. Not burdened with the ladylike polish of finishing school, she continually refers to Briggs with terms of endearment like "scurvy little rat." Her own job security rests on her torrid affair with her married boss, Chris Magruder (Dan Ackroyd).

The hardboiled detective, like Bogart's

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Sam Spade in "The Maltese Falcon," wears a rumpled suit, lives by himself in a grubby apartment and works alone. Briggs has Bogie's wardrobe and vocabulary, but Allen's tough-guy posturing makes Briggs soft-boiled at best. Skinny and sixty-ish, he embodies that hidden vulnerability that made Bogie irresistible to Bacall and other sultry sirens of the films noirs. The tough shell is only a ruse, and a pretty funny one at that. Allen's playing Bogart playing Spade points out the artificiality and the fun of the detective icon.

The third classic character is the beautiful but bad-girl heiress, Laura Kensington (Charlize Theron). Her godmothers of the genre, Barbara Stanwyck, Gloria Grahame, Joan Crawford and their generation of conniving vixens used their charms to manipulate and betray their prey, proving time and time again that agitated hormones immediately and invariably strike directly at the male brainstem. In their day, we thought their seductions were pretty steamy stuff, but looking back on them now, they were really quite innocent and unconsciously funny. Laura simmers under a Veronica Lake cascade of blonde curls, and practices her trade with the breathy subtlety of Mae West. Since the object of her artfully fabricated affection is a very flustered Woody Allen pretending to be Bogie, her deadpan vamping unmasks the mock seriousness of the old seduction scenes.

Vintage detectives had to deal with sinister masterminds, like Sydney Greenstreet, and as they pursue the case, they become criminal suspects themselves. Voltan (David Ogden Stiers), the criminal genius behind Briggs's troubles, doubles as a professional magician and hypnotist. Rather than cajole Briggs and Fitz into his scheme with his lies, like a classic villain, he simply hypnotizes them. Allen underlines the comic side of Voltan's knavery by scoring his scenes with the same music that he used for the bumbling hypnotist in "Oedipus Wrecks" (1989). Today the suave schemers of the old films noirs provoke the same amusement we once found in the moustache-twirling dastardly villains of the 19th-century stage.

Old-time private eyes also had to contend with the upright but dimwitted detectives of the city police force. The cops have an unfair advantage. They have political connections, and they are not involved financially or romantically with the alleged perpetrators. They have to arrest somebody, and nabbing a smart aleck gumshoe would polish their badges as much as bagging the actual criminal. Instead of city cops, Briggs, the in-house insurance company investigator, runs afoul of two detectives from an outside agency. With their fedoras welded down over their ears, this pair of yoked human zeppelins makes the diminutive Briggs seem even more fragile than he is.

The designer Santo Loquasto and the cinematographer Zhao Fei have beautifully recreated the dark look of the black-and-white film noir in color. The seedy apartments, cluttered offices, grimy police station, dark alleys and subway stations seem coated with an amber varnish. The result is a moody sepia tone that adds temporal distance to the film. It's a subconscious reminder that we are looking at something from the past, like old photos in a family album.

Much of the dialogue in Allen's script seems stilted and awkward. This should strike us as odd. Even those who cannot stand Woody Allen—and there is a lot of America outside New York—admit grudgingly that he is a master of the snappy one-liner. Has his Muse entered the age of hot flashes? Again, I think the effect is deliberate. The old screwball comedies and hard-boiled detective movies reveled in verbal sparring. Howard Hawks and Billy Wilder had their extremely witty, articulate lovers fire zingers at each other like duelists using Gatling guns at short range. Every movie detective tried to sound like Dashiell Hammett and every *femme noire* like Dorothy Parker. The dialogue was often sharp and funny, but as we look back on it now, it was also frequently overblown, stilted and awkward. At times the writers simply tried too hard. Maybe the lightening-fast repartee wasn't always as glib or as funny as we seem to remember it.

Does "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion" work? In part, yes. It's very funny in places. In part, no. The satire is clever, but the concept outreaches the execution. I'm fairly confident that I understand what he was trying to do, but the ends don't really justify the means this time. Broad satire of the Mel Brooks variety is difficult enough, but subtle, sophisticated satire, which presumes a great deal of knowledge on the part of the audience, offers almost insurmountable challenges. In this film, Woody Allen has provided a pleasant little comedy weighed down by his own artistic aspirations. In the end, it's not as funny as it might have been, nor as profound as it tries to be. ***Richard A. Blake, S.J.***

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Woody Allen as the insurance inspector C. W. Briggs