

The End of Hollywood

THAT DELIGHTFUL LULL between the end of classes and the beginning of exams provided the perfect opportunity to catch up on movies missed during the last several months. As it turns out, I—and thus regular readers of this column—have missed little. Two walls of the neighborhood video shop feature “new releases,” almost all of them targeted to audiences below the age of 21, or maybe 14. The action-adventures tend to include at least enough fantasy or science fiction to justify the computer-generated graphics that make them look like a wide-screen video game. The comedies generally seem to feature some dopey guy with his fat sidekick concocting some preposterous scheme to seduce a voluptuous but equally dopey cheerleader during spring break.

Discouraged but not deterred, I picked up DVD versions of “Sexy Beast,” a pedestrian British crime caper with a spectacular secondary character played by Ben Kingsley; “Moulin Rouge,” a gaudy rock-opera with marvelous visual effects; and “Mulholland Drive,” David Lynch’s enigmatic yet hypnotic murder mystery that may be a prolonged dream sequence, or science fiction or a ghost story. Like “Memento,” which tells its story backwards, with each scene progressively filling in enough background to make the story nearly intelligible, “Mulholland Drive” rejects the linear narrative. “Moulin Rouge” doesn’t have enough narrative to reject. This new style of anti-narrative mimics the viewing habits of contemporary television users, who surf channels with their remotes, settle on interesting scenes for a few moments and then move on with little concern for coherence or closure. So much for a beginning, middle and end. So much for my catching up.

Hollywood Ending leads me to believe that Woody Allen shares my dis-



Treat Williams and Woody Allen in Mr. Allen’s new film, “Hollywood Ending.”

comfort with the new directions of the film industry. The title is both pun and a thesis statement. Yes, in keeping with the literal title, the final sequence provided the happy Hollywood ending that classical film narrative technique requires. At the same time, the film also offers a portrait of an industry weakened through generations of inbreeding, twitching in commercial straightjackets and now gasping for its final breaths amid a miasma of artistic narcissism. Never a friend of the Hollywood side of the industry, Doctor Allen may have reached an overly grim diagnosis, and maybe not. Ever the grinning vivisectionist, Allen keeps his colleagues and cadaver laughing until the dismemberment is complete. Victor Frankenstein with schtick.

On its surface, the story appears to be another typical Allen comedy about the talented and hopelessly neurotic cave dwellers of Manhattan. Val Waxman (Woody Allen) first appears in a hooded parka, calling from Arctic Canada where he is on location filming a deodorant commercial. He’s on his way back to New York and his live-in girlfriend, Lori (Debra Messing), an aspiring actor who could pass as his granddaughter. He’s been fired. He’s always fired. Once a successful director, he has not had a winner in a dozen years. To the power brokers in Hollywood, he’s poi-

son. They admit his talent, but with his bundle of neuroses and compulsions, he cannot complete a project. No one will work with him. For some inexplicable reason, his former wife, Ellie (Tia Leoni), a studio executive, argues that as the quintessential New York director, he would be perfect for “The City That Never Sleeps.” In creating Val Waxman, Woody Allen cuts very close to the autobiographical bone.

With the help of his oily, ever-grinning-through-expensive-bridgework agent, Al Hack (Mark Rydell), Waxman gets the assignment. One problem arises almost immediately. As the cast gathers for the first day of shooting, Waxman suddenly goes blind. No problem, explains the specialists. The condition is only psychosomatic and could go away at any time. Nonetheless, Waxman can’t see Central Park. No problem, argues Hack. They can fake it. The shooting goes ahead with a blind director, which according to Allen is typical of many Hollywood films. Ellie comes back into Waxman’s life as a faithful assistant to help him hide his problem and finish the picture. After all, she has her own job to worry about. She insisted on hiring this hysterical nut-case in the first place. Their collusion leads to the inevitable romantic-comedy complications.

That's the story line, but it doesn't work. The concept of a blind film director makes a brilliant satirical point, but the comic turns on blindness were exhausted in vaudeville seventy years ago. Waxman looks in the wrong direction during conversations, resorts to double-talk to avoid making decisions on props, costumes and set decoration, stumbles over furniture and fails to perceive a bare-faced (and bare almost everything else) seduction from his leading lady. Most of the time the sight gags are sadly predictable. Pun intended.

The script lacks the usual Allen tautness. Waxman accidentally reveals his scheme to a sleazy journalist, Andrea Ford (Jodie Markell), but nothing comes of his revelations. Does she publish her story or not? Allen never tells us. Waxman's analyst brings up his relationship with his estranged son, Tony (Mark Webber), a punk rocker who eats live rats as part of his act. In a reconciliation meeting, they talk about "seeing" one another's values. To his credit Allen backs away from the miraculous psychiatric cure of Hollywood cliché. He backs away from any other connection to the story as well. The son simply vanishes from the story. Why bring him in at all? And unless New York weather patterns have changed in the last few years, how is it possible for Al Hack to leave a Passover seder and arrive at Waxman's

home on a beautiful summer evening?

For all its disappointment, "Hollywood Ending" offers its own quirky delights. The Allen one-liners sparkle through the dialogue, and that alone is worth the outrageous price of a ticket. The satire is deliciously venomous, especially when it sinks its fangs into the Hollywood power brokers. Hal (Treat Williams) runs the studio, but he can't pronounce "auteur," and when Waxman worries if Hal will hang around the set all day, Ellie says his attention span lasts only about a half hour. Surely the name invokes the memory of the computer in "2001: A Space Odyssey." Ed (George Hamilton) attends all the high-level meetings, with no apparent qualifications other than his suntan. Elio Sebastian (the fashion designer, Isaac Mizrahi), the production designer sent by Hollywood to recreate authentic New York sets, finds Central Park unacceptable and plans to rebuild it, along with Harlem and Times Square, on the studio back lot, just to make it look more realistic. Like her male counterparts, Ellie looks great, as though she has spent more of her life in California health clubs than in the archives of the New York Public Library.

New Yorkers also get the Allen treatment. Lori, Waxman's girlfriend, is such a bubble-brain that one is astonished that she was able to find the set, let alone memorize several highly forgettable lines.

Andrea, the reptilian journalist, has been lined up by studio publicity to do a cover piece on the film, but her knowledge of movies seems limited to the boudoir escapades of stars and directors. Allen's feelings about this type of journalism have been well documented. Even though he has furnished a mother lode of material for the tabloids himself, he can't resist killing the messenger one more time.

Waxman insists on hiring a foreign camera operator to give the film an authentic New York feel. His choice (Lu Yu), however, is Chinese and speaks not a word of English. What's more, he seems to be just as crazy, temperamental and incompetent as Waxman, the blind director. His translator (Barney Cheng), a business major from N.Y.U., is hopelessly confused by these artsy types, like Margaret Dumont lost amid the Marx Brothers. Allen never fully cashes in on the comic potential of the situation.

Despite its slipshod script and squandered possibilities, "Hollywood Ending" has its moments. The whole is much less than the sum of the parts, it's true, but some of the parts are quite entertaining. In addition, the sustained satire keeps its focus clearly in place throughout the meanderings of the narrative. At the end, Waxman/Allen seems to reject the American film industry, even in its New York incarnation, no more on that. The final sequence holds one last ironic surprise.

Perhaps this review is overly gentle with a clearly disappointing effort. Despite Woody Allen's legendary contempt for critics, reviewers like me still treat him gently, and with good reason. What other filmmaker has so definitively rejected the computer-generated flash and glitter of action-adventure comic books and gross-out sex comedies aimed at 12-year olds? Who else provides adults with consistently funny, yet thought-provoking films on a yearly basis?

Follow my example. Take a tour of your own video shop in search of a new release that does not assault your senses and insult your intelligence. You will find very few. We should be grateful for a second- or even third-rate Woody Allen film, since it's a good deal better than just about anything else you'll find in multiplex or video stores these days. I'm disappointed. I'm grateful. I'm neurotic. I'm a New Yorker. You wanna make something out of it?

Richard A. Blake, S.J.



Woody Allen and Debra Messing in "Hollywood Ending."