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"Celebrity," a once-over-lightly rehash of mostly stale Allen themes and motifs. Annoyingly mannered in performance as well as tiresomely familiar in the way it trots out its angst-ridden urban characters' problems, pic has a hastily conceived, patchwork feel that is occasionally leavened by some lively supporting turns and the presence of so many attractive people onscreen. Even a 10-minute appearance by the world's hottest star, Leonardo DiCaprio, won't be able to lift this above Allen's usual low-level B.O. flight path.

Shooting in black-and-white for the first time since "Shadows and Fog" six years ago, Allen here deals once again with such subjects as fame and sexual treachery, but in a much less trenchant and amusing way than he did in his last picture, "Deconstructing Harry." And although the Woodman isn't present physically this time out, his personality comes through all too forcefully via not one but two counterparts with

Branagh's) nervousness and servility during this episode are too much to bear, Theron's impact proves so overpowering, and Allen's writing of her wildcat character is so dead-on, that the sequence promises more than the rest of the film delivers.

Lee then becomes serious with the pragmatic Bonnie (Famke Janssen), who is on the verge of moving in with Lee when he suddenly gets something going with Nola (Winona Ryder), a waitress-actress who has been hovering around the edges of his life for some time. One more time, an Allen character has to awkwardly tell a woman who has come to trust and love him that, yes, he's a jerk and a schmuck and a skunk, but he has to move on because he's just found true love.

Paralleling Lee's amorous misadventures is Robin's gradual romantic and professional blossoming under the wing of TV producer Tony Gardella (Joe Mantegna), an Italian-American *mensch* who is endlessly loving and patient with Robin's neuroses, oversees her makeover and promotes her into an on-the-air tal-

Branagh and Davis have limited screen time together, and it's just as well, since the sight of them enacting their Allen shticks simultaneously is a consummation devoutly not to be wished.

Allen-size emotional complexes.

In one of the most colossal casting faux pas in memory, Branagh portrays Lee Simon, a feature and travel writer who, when first glimpsed on a Manhattan-street film location, is doing a story on screen queen Nicole Oliver (Melanie Griffith). The married Nicole subsequently shows the journo her modest childhood home, where he puts the make on her. She declines to sleep with him in her girlhood bed but, amazingly, offers to service him orally with a line that, in this Clintonian era, will no doubt provoke smirks and snorts: "What I do from the neck up, that's a different story."

Thus begins Lee's mostly desultory series of sexual escapades in the wake of his split from wife, Robin (Judy Davis), a painfully insecure schoolteacher. While the fortysomething Robin considers plastic surgery and can't imagine what she'll do with the rest of her life, Lee energetically throws himself into the social scene.

First, in a jaw-droppingly sexy appearance, is Charlize Theron as a blond supermodel who teases Lee all through a night on the town with intimations of orgasmic delights to come, only to drop him before they get home. Although Lee's (and

ent. Despite her man's devotion, Robin remains paralyzingly maladroit and so concerned about her sexual deficiencies that, in a would-be classic set piece that instead plays as a fizzled embarrassment, she recruits a hooker (Bebe Neuwirth) to instruct her in the art of oral sex using a banana as a prop. This bit was done much better years ago in "Fast Times at Ridgemont High."

Allen's cinematic preoccupation with infidelity dates all the way back to his first screenplay, "What's New, Pussycat?," and he's often dealt with it more imaginatively and humorously than he does here. Similarly, he most effectively expressed the poignancy of a failed romance in "Annie Hall," and this time it's scary to imagine Lee and Robin as a couple at all. Branagh and Davis have limited screen time together, and it's just as well, since the sight of them enacting their Allen shticks simultaneously is a consummation devoutly not to be wished.

Branagh is simply embarrassing as he flails, stammers and gesticulates in a manner that suggests a direct imitation of Allen himself. The actor's halting, hesitant, deferential delivery also makes his allure to the film's bevy of beautiful women impossible

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CELEBRITY

(COMEDY-DRAMA — B&W)

A Miramax release of a Sweetland Films presentation of a Jean Doumanian production. Produced by Doumanian. Executive producer, J.E. Beaucaire. Co-producer, Richard Brick. Co-executive producers, Jack Rollins, Charles H. Joffe, Letty Aronson.

Directed, written by Woody Allen. Camera (DuArt B&W, Technicolor prints), Sven Nykvist; editor, Susan E. Morse; production designer, Santo Loquasto; art director, Tom Warren; set decorator, Susan Kaufman; costume designer, Suzy Benzinger; sound (Dolby), Les Lazarowitz; assistant director, Richard Patrick; casting, Juliet Taylor, Laura Rosenthal. Reviewed at the Aidikoff screening room, Beverly Hills, Aug. 28, 1998. (In Venice Film Festival — noncompeting; New York Film Festival — opener.) MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 113 MIN.

David Hank Azaria
Lee Simon Kenneth Branagh
Robin Simon Judy Davis
Brandon Darrow Leonardo DiCaprio
Nicole Oliver Melanie Griffith
Bonnie Famke Janssen
Dr. Lupus Michael Lerner
Tony Gardella Joe Mantegna
Hooker Bebe Neuwirth
Nola Winona Ryder
Supermodel Charlize Theron

With: Greg Mottola, Dylan Baker, Isaac Mizrahi, Kate Burton, Andre Gregory, Patti D'Arbanville, Gretchen Mol, Mary Jo Buttafuoco, Joey Buttafuoco, Allison Janney, Donald Trump, Aida Turturro, Jeffrey Wright.

By TODD McCARTHY

The spectacle of Kenneth Branagh and Judy Davis doing over-the-top Woody Allen impersonations creates a neurotic energy meltdown in



BAD BEHAVIOR: Leonardo DiCaprio and Gretchen Mol are among the ensemble cast of Woody Allen's "Celebrity," which toplines Kenneth Branagh, far right.

CELEBRITY

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to swallow; when Allen himself has played opposite gorgeous younger actresses, one could rationalize his appeal, at least until recently, by conferring some of his own genius celebrity status upon his characters, no matter how compulsive and whiny they might have been. With Branagh, there's nothing to explain why any of these women give him the time of day.

For her part, Davis was brilliant in "Husbands and Wives" and has appeared effectively in other Allen films, but she not only overdoes the neurotic posturing this time, she is essentially miscast; Davis simply conveys too much intelligence, strength and resilience to convince as a hopeless and pliant contemporary woman. If this was the film on which, as reported, coffee was not served on the set as a budget consideration, a lack of caffeine is not apparent in the exceedingly wired lead performances.

By contrast, some of the huge number of supporting players do nicely in a film whose highly episodic nature has people coming and going with ease. Ryder, as an emotionally volatile aspiring actress, registers more forcefully in her few scenes, and creates a fuller, more credible character than she has in her last several pictures combined.

As for DiCaprio, he turns up at the 55-minute mark playing a spoiled young film star throwing a tantrum in a hotel room, pushing around his girlfriend (Gretchen Mol), insulting staff and inviting the sycophantic Lee, who is trying to sell him a screenplay, to Atlantic City. Much like the misfit Allen who sneezed on the coke in "Annie Hall," Lee is the one person at the star's drug-driven hooker orgy who can't get with the program: He tries to discuss script changes while the self-absorbed thesp is busy humping away. DiCaprio is entirely convincing.

Sven Nykvist's monochromatic lensing, while generally refreshing, isn't flattering to some of the femmes, particularly Davis.
