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Aimless yet amiable farce takes no risks

By ELEANOR RINGEL

Cox News Service

Given the number of potshots aimed at Woody Allen the past few years, it's hardly surprising he's named his new movie "Bullets Over Broadway."

However, this theater-centric farce seems an aberration — a jockey exploration of "the show must go on" vagaries of live theater in an earlier, more glamorous era. Writing in the Runyonesque mode of his "Broadway Danny Rose," Allen takes us back to the Great White Way of the Roaring '20s — the days of Max (Maxwell Anderson) and Gene (Eugene O'Neill) and bathtub gin. The days when a naive young play-

★★ out of ★★★★★

An Allen oddity.

wright who insists he writes "to transform men's souls" can be bought out by a well-heeled mobster in the mood to back a Broadway show on behalf of his stage-struck chippy.

That's pretty much the plot of "Bullets Over Broadway," an aimless, albeit amiable piece.

The movie's big twist is that the untutored, trigger-happy Cheech (Chazz Palmenteri) turns out to be a far better playwright than the cafe-hopping, art-spouting Shayne (John Cusack). But as insights go, this isn't an especially

meaningful one. While it may be news to the New York intelligentsia that you can be a talent without an Ivy League degree and a background in Thomas Mann, to a lot of us around these parts, this is old news.

The disturbing thing about "Bullets" is how safe it is. How it poses a moral dilemma, then tackles it in a blinkered wish-fulfillment style (as in "Husbands and Wives," when our Woody turned down the luscious babe-let, Juliette Lewis, and wandered off in the rain).

"Bullets Over Broadway" is best described as an Allen oddity.

As this kind of thing goes, it's satisfying enough, but as a Woody Allen film, it's desultory at best.

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