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CANNES REVIEWS

YOU WILL MEET A TALL DARK STRANGER

(SPAIN-U.K.)

A Sony Pictures Classics (in U.S.) release of a Mediapro, Versatil Cinema and Gravier Prods. presentation in association with Antena 3 Films and Antena 3 TV of a Dippermouth production. Produced by Letty Aronson, Stephen Tenenbaum, Jaume Roures. Executive producer, Javier Mendez. Co-producers, Helen Robin, Nicky Kentish Barnes. Co-executive producer, Jack Rollins.

Directed, written by Woody Allen. Camera (Deluxe color), Vilmos Zsigmond; editor, Alisa Lepselter; production designer, Jim Clay; art director, Dominic Masters; costume designer, Beatrix Aruna Pasztor; sound, Peter Glossop; assistant director, Ben Howarth; casting, Juliet Taylor, Patricia DiCerto, Gail Stevens. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (noncompeting), May 15, 2010. Running time: 98 MIN.**

Greg Antonio Banderas
Roy Josh Brolin
Alfie Anthony Hopkins
Helena Gemma Jones
Dia Freida Pinto
Sally Naomi Watts

With: Pauline Collins, Ewen Bremner, Lucy Punch, Celia Imrie, Jim Piddock, Roger Ashton-Griffiths, Alex Macqueen, Anna Friel, Neil Jackson, Fenella Woolgar.

By JUSTIN CHANG

Variety 5/24-30/10 p18
By now it's clear Woody Allen doesn't much believe in God, destiny or the notion that life has any larger meaning, a message he tubthumps to increasingly feeble and unpersuasive effect in "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger." Fitfully amusing and nearly saved by its distin-



Naomi Watts and Josh Brolin are creative people unhappily married to each other in Woody Allen's "You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger."

guished cast, this London-set ensembler is another of Allen's patented ironic ruminations on marital angst, vocational discontent and the overall pointlessness of human existence, so why not sit back and laugh at the futility of it all? Auds just might, though overall mild impact should keep B.O. spirits from smiling too warmly on "Stranger."

Fittingly, the song chosen to play over the writer-director's trademark white-on-black, Windsor-type opening credits is "When You Wish Upon a Star." Along with the film's title, it's a choice that immediately establishes the theme of supernatural wish-fulfillment driving this rueful yet emotionally detached dramedy, whose many characters are always looking to greener pastures to satisfy romantic needs, fulfill dreams and avoid having to

reckon with their shortcomings.

First up to bat is weepy, overbearing basket-case Helena Shepridge (Gemma Jones), who visits a psychic, Cristal Delgiorno (Pauline Collins), seeking solace and good tidings after having been abandoned by Alfie (Anthony Hopkins), her husband of 40 years. Helena is inspired by her brush with the spiritual realm and frequently drops in on her daughter, Sally (Naomi Watts), to report Cristal's uniformly upbeat predictions, much to the annoyance of Sally's American husband, Roy (Josh Brolin).

Naturally, Sally and Roy have problems of their own; he's a blocked writer unable to capitalize on the promise of his first novel, while she's been forced to put off her dreams of having a family and opening her own art gallery in order to support them both. Their mutual

dissatisfaction leads them each to look elsewhere for love; Roy begins a flirtation with Dia (Freida Pinto), the fetching young thing in the flat across the street, while Sally entertains notions of running away with her handsome boss, Greg (Antonio Banderas), who happens to be unhappily married himself.

Compounding the general atmosphere of desperation and poor romantic decisions, Alfie, who lost a son years ago and has always wanted another, begins a May-December fling with prostitute/aspiring actress Charmaine (Lucy Punch), to whom he eventually proposes marriage. Meanwhile, Helena warms to fellow occult nut Jonathan (Roger Ashton-Griffiths), who's obsessed with trying to contact the spirit of his recently dead wife.

This being an Allen picture, it's set in a privileged fantasy world where characters pursue artistic-literary aspirations, go to the opera and make casual reference to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Consequently, tacky, tarted-up Charmaine comes in for some of the film's worst knocks, her unrefined accent and painful lack of sophistication (she doesn't get Ibsen!) providing an endless source of cheap laughs, as does Helena's obsessive conviction that she has had past lives. It's that curdled blend of cynicism and superiority — the safe retreat from any sort of earnest engagement or inquiry into a pseudo-intellectual cocoon — that gives "Stranger," for all its incidental amusements and visual pleasures, such a sour aftertaste.

The characters and their various emotional/occupational complica-

tions are continually updated by a Shakespeare-referencing narrator who sounds awfully close to the flat, American-accented voice deployed in "Vicky Cristina Barcelona." But where that recent Allen standout ultimately showed as much as it told and had the good grace to invest its characters' yearning with an ardent, searching romanticism, the v.o. here merely serves to amplify the smug distance between the people onscreen and the audience.

The actors do their best to reduce that distance, and succeed quite well at times, despite the pervasive sense that they're as trapped, performance-wise, as their characters. As the unhappy young marrieds and the meddlesome mother-in-law, Brolin, Watts and Jones make a crack comic trio, and their bitter three-way arguments — captured in an impressive series of handheld long takes — constitute the film's strongest scenes. Pinto ("Slumdog Millionaire") is lovely in a part that gives her little to do, other than to perhaps flatter the men in the audience that a beautiful woman who learns her neighbor is a peeping tom will be turned on rather than creeped out beyond belief.

Lensed by the great Vilmos Zsigmond (who also served as d.p. on Allen's "Cassandra's Dream" and "Melinda and Melinda") in lovely, light-infused textures that convey a warmth of feeling otherwise lacking throughout, this Spain-U.K. co-production is the filmmaker's fourth feature to be shot in London, making effective, unshowy use of the city's locations. Helmer's trademark jazz is used to gently punch up the comedy in a few scenes.