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READY TO WEAR (PRET-A-PORTER)

A Miramax release. Produced, directed by Robert Altman. Executive producers, Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, Ian Jessel. Co-producers, Scott Bushnell, Jon Kilik. Screenplay, Altman, Barbara Shulgasser. Camera (Technicolor; Panavision wide-screen), Pierre Mignot, Jean Lepine; editor, Geraldine Peroni; film editor, Suzy Elmiger; music, Michel Legrand; music supervisor, Allan Nicholls; production design, Stephen Altman; art direction, William Amello; set design, Jean Canovas; set decoration, Françoise Dupertois; costume design, Catherine Leterrier; sound (Dolby), Alain Curvelier; associate producer, Brian D. Leitch; assistant directors, Jerome Enrico, Philippe Landoulsi; second unit director, Nicholls. Reviewed at Sony Studios screening room, Culver City, Dec. 6, 1994. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 132 MIN.

With: Sophia Loren (Isabella de la Fontaine), Marcello Mastroianni (Sergei/Sergio), Julia Roberts (Anne Eisenhower), Tim Robbins (Joe Flynn), Kim Basinger (Kitty Potter), Stephen Rea (Milo O'Brannagan), Anouk Aimee (Simone Lowenthal), Lauren Bacall (Slim Chrysler), Lili Taylor (Fiona Ulrich), Sally Kellerman (Sissy Wanamaker), Tracey Ullman (Nina Scant), Linda Hunt (Regina Krumm), Rupert Everett (Jack Lowenthal), Forest Whitaker (Cy Bianco), Richard E. Grant (Cort Romney), Danny Aiello (Major Hamilton), Teri Garr (Louise Hamilton), Lyle Lovett (Clint Lammeraux), Jean Rochefort (Inspector Tantpis), Michel Blanc (Inspector Forget), Anne Canovas (Violetta Romney), Jean-Pierre Cassel (Olivier de la Fontaine), Francois Cluzet (Jean-Pierre), Rossy de Palma (Pilar), Kasia Figura (Vivienne), Ute Lemper (Albertine), Tara Leon (Kiki Simpson), Chiara Mastroianni (Sophie), Tom Novembre (Reggie), Sam Robards (Craig), Georgianna Robertson (Dane Simpson).

By whichever title you prefer, Robert Altman's latest ensemble extravaganza, "Ready to Wear (Pret-a-Porter)," has all the style, glitz and head-turning star power of an A-list party — and about as much substance. With its focus fragmented among 31 featured players and countless background figures, the film relies upon surface tics and bits of business to sketch the hectic week when fashion designers trot out their latest collections in Paris. While pic is eye-catching and fitfully amusing, net effect proves frivolous and ephemeral, closer to the director's "Health" and "A Wedding" than to "Nashville" or "Short Cuts." No doubt recognizing that critics aren't likely to rally around this Altman opus, Miramax is hoping for the best by opening wide at Christ-



GLAMOUR GALORE: Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren reunite in "Ready to Wear (Pret-a-Porter)."

mas. Heavy promo push may stimulate some early rush buying but prospective customers will more likely window shop than make the purchase, resulting in B.O. as durable as last year's fashions.

Shot like a luxuriant documentary in a world of boundless style, attitude and money, the film sets dramatic inventions of consummate artifice and silliness against a milieu that is evoked with a maximum of verisimilitude. Free-wheeling director's strategy was

For the record, the "Pret-a-Porter" title appears onscreen in logo form with "Ready-to-Wear" laid underneath in a parenthetical subtitle.

Pic's first joke is writing out the upfront Miramax and Altman credits in Russian against a backdrop of Marcello Mastroianni scurrying across Red Square. Remainder of the action is set in a very visible Paris, and Mastroianni's mysteriously furtive character provides the springboard for what passes for a dramatic thread in Altman and

ion commission, gags to death on a sandwich. The unknown man's flight and jump into the Seine lead people to suspect that Cassel has been deliberately killed, setting up a fabricated "murder" plot that is so much nonsense. Although the show must go on despite the industry leader's death, his loss naturally has its repercussions. His glamorous widow, Sophia Loren, who hated him, becomes the figurehead of the week's events while his mistress, top designer Anouk Aimee, and her son, Rupert Everett, are facing the prospect of selling their label to Texas boot tycoon Lyle Lovett.

Sneaking around one of the hotels, Mastroianni makes off with the suitcase of American sports reporter Tim Robbins, who is kept in Paris to cover the Cassel murder case and, poor fellow, is forced to share a room with another reporter, Julia Roberts. After a shaky start they decide to make the best of it and never leave the bed for the entire week.

Supplying the scorecard for the rest of the assembled tastemakers is fashion reporter Kim Basinger, who interviews everyone as they arrive and, microphone in hand, covers the shows for the folks back home. Among those checking in are magazine editors Linda Hunt, Sally Kellerman

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The picture's luminous surfaces represent its most appealing points, from the ritzy Paris settings and cutting-edge clothes to the score and, above all, the beautiful people.

to mix his actors with real designers, models and other scenesters with hoped-for lively and combustible results. But while the surfaces, backgrounds and sense of constant motion are authentic to their tinselly cores, what goes on among the fictional participants resembles gag-reliant improv routines that haven't been entirely worked out.

Barbara Shulgasser's checkerboard scenario designed to create a mosaic of the denizens of the fashion world.

Mastroianni flits through the action, quietly disrupting the lives of many of the participants in the week's hectic events. Most significantly, he hops out of a limo when his companion, Jean-Pierre Cassel, head of the host French fash-

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man and Tracey Ullman, all of whom spend most of their time pursuing and being humiliated by top fashion photographer Stephen Rea; ex-magazine doyenne Lauren Bacall, here named "Slim" after her character in her "To Have and Have Not" screen bow; retailer Danny Aiello, who likes to dress in drag and whose wife, Teri Garr, likes to shop; New

their own. Several major designers were responsible for the creations on view, contributing to the pic's authenticity. Real and occasionally famous fashion models pop up parading them for the onlookers and, as if this film needed it, a pinch of extra glamour is added by party scene cameos by Cher, Harry Belafonte and a host of w.k. designers.

Altman has indisputably come up with a one-of-a-kind finale, a fashion show in the buff that was sprung unannounced upon the audience-within-the-film and will leave film auds gaping in wonderment.

The picture's luminous surfaces represent its most appealing points,



IN FASHION: Linda Hunt (left), Tracey Ullman, Danny Aiello, Sally Kellerman and Kim Basinger appear in Robert Altman's "Ready-to-Wear (Pret-a-Porter)," set in Paris.

York Times photojournalist Lili Taylor, whose professed preference for girls is never followed up; and Ute Lemper, a supermodel who shocks everyone by turning up looking ready for the delivery room rather than the runway.

Designers and models themselves get relatively short shrift, with the exception of Richard E. Grant's ultra-effete hand-waver and Forest Whitaker's down-to-earth designer, who happen to be an item. Most prominent mannequins are twin stunners Kiki and Dane Simpson, one of whom is married to Everett while the other is his mistress.

The Mastroianni subplot culminates, unsurprisingly, in his reunion with Loren, and longtime admirers of these two screen greats will get a kick out of the restaging of Loren's boudoir striptease from "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" with her man crowing like a rooster as she flicks lingerie items in his direction. Not many stars would dare attempt such a scene 30 years after they first did it, and fewer could get away with it, but Loren proves herself to be in a special category virtually all by herself.

On the other hand, few of the other performers add any luster to their images by virtue of their appearances here. As the trendy photog, Rea is rather amusing in his smug sadism but at the expense of Hunt, Kellerman and Ullman, whom he deliberately snaps in embarrassingly compromising positions. Robbins and Roberts had the tough job of spending the whole shoot in the sack and seem utterly disconnected from the rest of the movie. Aiello wouldn't make anyone's short list of men who would look good in a dress, and not much thought seems to have been given to how to work Bacall, Taylor or Lovett more meaningfully into the proceedings.

Serving as the film's spectacle, of course, are the fashion shows themselves, which have a fascination all

from the ritzy Paris settings and cutting-edge clothes to the dozens-of-songs score and, above all, the beautiful people who make for terrific people-watching. But one is left knowing little more about the fashion industry or the people who make it go than can be gleaned by flipping through an issue of *Vogue*.

—Todd McCarthy