

Document Citation

Title	Madcap noir
Author(s)	Bill Gallo
Source	<i>East Bay Express</i>
Date	2001 Aug 22
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	46
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The curse of the jade scorpion, Allen, Woody, 2001

Madcap Noir

Woody Allen's latest romp through Old New York combines (among other things) a skirt-chasing insurance investigator with the charm of a rodent, a wise-cracking Vassar grad who takes no guff, and a nightclub hypnotist in a sequined turban who doubles as a major jewel thief. The year is 1940. The soundtrack warbles with nostalgic Duke Ellington and Harry James tunes. Thanks to the brilliant Chinese cinematographer Zhao Fei, Manhattan's art deco office towers and smart supper clubs are bathed in shimmering gold light. The dialogue, Allen's own, seems a useful hybrid of two period icons — hardboiled Raymond Chandler and softboiled S.J. Perelman.

BY
BILL
GALLO

In sum, *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* is a thoroughly likable, if familiar, Woody Allen comedy — not the most original or revealing tintype in the director's gallery, perhaps, but blessedly free of the self-conscious hand-wringing and tortured navel-gazing that impede the former Mr. Konigsberg's more sluggish efforts. It's also a welcome antidote to last year's listless *Small Time Crooks*. From start to finish, here's good, swift fun, all dressed up in an array of brown fedoras and slinky satin cocktail gowns.

That's not to say *Scorpion* lacks the usual and required dose of neurosis. In the realm of deluded social misfits, the stammering but self-important insurance man Woody plays here — one C.W. Briggs, ace investigator for North Coast Life and Casualty — holds his own against any of the screwed-up gag writers and bungling talent agents he's portrayed in the past. Convinced that he's both an intuitive genius and a slick ladies' man, poor Briggsie plows through life on legwork and luck. Somehow, he tracks down a missing Picasso portrait but has trouble, amid all those cubes, finding the nose. When his play in the seventh race at Aqueduct runs seventh, he laments: "Never bet on a horse that has Parkinson's." When it comes to snappy one-liners, Woody Allen still has no peer but Perelman. And maybe the Marx Brothers.

He's not bad as a casting director, either. Once again the writer-director-star has assembled a company of actors who suit their roles like rhinestones on a cigarette



girl, or the shoeshine on a lounge lizard's wingtips. Helen Hunt (an Oscar-winner for *As Good as It Gets*), gets the plum as Betty Ann Fitzgerald, a fast-talking, college-educated "efficiency expert" the insurance company has just hired to streamline its operation. For this latter-day Rosalind Russell, the most noticeable anachronism in the building is, of course, C.W. Briggs himself, whose entrenched habits and smarmy attitudes are as outmoded as Fitzgerald's new-wave ways are contemporary. Instantly, they hate each other. For now. Scoffs she: "You couldn't find your nose if I turned the lights out, you roach."

Meanwhile, Dan Aykroyd oozes oily resolve as Magruder, the blustering office manager who undertakes an illicit affair with Fitzgerald, and the supporting office workers (flirty Elizabeth Berkley, plain-as-day John Schuck and Wallace Shawn) are perfect mini-portraits of prewar striving. A bit later we behold Charlize Theron as steamy Laura Kensington, a spoiled rich girl straight out of film noir. Slumming with the skinny, bespectacled hero in his disaster of an apartment, this

platinum-blond vision of luscious curves and unbridled presumption lets fly with what may be the movie's most Woodyesque jibe: "It's exciting to be in a myopic insurance clerk."

Allen and Company steal deftly from double-crossing classics like *Out of the Past* and *The Maltese Falcon*, as well as sniping, razor-sharp screwball comedies like *His Girl Friday*. But there's also some sweet-tempered homage to *The Manchurian Candidate* in here, twisted to fit *Scorpion's* satirical agenda. Sipping highballs in the storied Rainbow Room, Briggs and Fitzgerald both fall prey to a scamming stage hypnotist who calls himself Voltan (*M*A*S*H* favorite David Ogden Stiers), and thereupon turn the movie's madcap excursions into entranced jewel theft, false accusation, misleading clues, and unexpected romance. If Woody Allen has learned anything in the decades separating *Bananas* and *Sweet and Lowdown*, it's that you can never go wrong trashing revered movie genres with relentless

Woody Allen loses points with Helen Hunt.

attacks of wit. Before we're done here, he's happily savaged the lowlife insurance men of *Double Indemnity*, the conventions of all those business-world comedies from the '50s (*Desk Set*, et al.), even the alluring mind-games of the Hitchcock canon. As for his hometown, not since *Bullets Over Broadway*, in which he took off on '20s gangster movies and

backstage melodrama, has Allen so ably riffed on the bygone pop culture of the city he loves so much.

But you needn't be a native New Yorker to glory in *Scorpion*. You needn't be a neurotic bundle of nerves wondering where your next pastrami on rye is coming from. Or a dyed-in-the-wool Knicks fan. When his spirits run this high and his comic aim proves this sure, Woody Allen belongs to everyone, and that's exactly as it should be. Laboring through thick and thin, producing a movie a year, like clockwork, he's earned our respect. And, I daresay, our love. ■

The Curse of the Jade Scorpion

Written and directed by Woody Allen. Starring Woody Allen, Helen Hunt, Dan Aykroyd, and Charlize Theron. Opens Friday.

SCORPION IS FUN IF FAMILIAR, ONE OF ALLEN'S TYPICAL MANHATTAN RIFFS.