

Document Citation

Title	Blind man's bluff
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	2002 May 07
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	142
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Hollywood ending, Allen, Woody, 2002

Village Voice 05107102 p.142

Don't Let Me Be Missundaztood

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

BY DENNIS LIM

HOLLYWOOD ENDING

Written and directed by Woody Allen
DreamWorks Opens May 3

HOME MOVIE

Directed by Chris Smith
Cowboy Opens May 3

Woody Allen has been cracking wise about mortality since he was a young man, but *Hollywood Ending*, the 66-year-old director's 31st feature in 34 years, sees him finally confronting the threat of irrelevancy. For only the second time in his career, Allen plays what a studio boss in the new movie dismissively calls an *owtwer*, and indeed, pill-popping has-been Val Waxman could be *Stardust Memories*' beleaguered filmmaker some two decades on: a cantankerous, terminally misunderstood artist who lost his audience somewhere along the way.

This being an Allen film, the real-life context keeps intruding. *Hollywood Ending* surfaces in a climate where each new Woody opening, even on home turf, no longer imparts the tingle of annual ritual. The almost cuddly NYC tribute at the Academy Awards should generate some goodwill. But while the longtime mediaphobe's municipal pride is surely genuine, is it too cynical to point out that, since *Annie Hall*, he's never gone this many years without an Oscar nomination? Or that, two-thirds of the way into a three-picture deal with a major studio, his undercompensated financiers might feel entitled to a little PR boost?

Introduced shooting a TV commercial in the Canadian tundra, Val is, like Woody, a once revered Oscar winner on a downslide. But shticky self-deprecation is soon redressed with aggrieved contempt. Discussing demographics at a pitch meeting, Val wonders "why the country got so stupid suddenly." The line would have been funnier had its author not, a mere eight months ago, lobbed a stink bomb called *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* at said country.

Still, the central conceit is Allen's most



QUASI-SUPERNATURAL SPECTACLE: ALLEN AND MESSING IN *HOLLYWOOD ENDING*

amusing since *Bullets Over Broadway*. Val lands a splashy comeback gig helming a Runyonesque period piece thanks to the largesse of his ex-wife (Téa Leoni), now the girlfriend of a Hollywood bigwig (Treat Williams). On the eve of shooting, the harried filmmaker succumbs to psychosomatic blindness. In the narrative's drollest twist, the NYU student (Barney Cheng) who's working as the Chinese cinematographer's translator is hastily recruited as covert enabler and de facto director. (Allen recently

collaborated with Fifth Generation stalwart DP Zhao Fei on three consecutive movies.)

Hollywood Ending confirms that acting has long been a sink-or-swim proposition in Allen's movies. Even Leoni, with her diamond-hard screwball aplomb, barely survives (Debra Messing and Tiffani Thiessen, as token Woodman accessories, are instantly washed ashore). The metaphor of sightlessness is enforced less rigidly than in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*; Val's condition mainly facilitates some agreeable (i

klutzily staged) pratfalls and a few tepid snickers about artistic "vision." This reviewer's initial conjecture—that the premise serves as an admission of guilt by the least visually cognizant of major American directors—is probably wishful thinking.

While *Deconstructing Harry* threw a self-justifying tantrum at the intersection of art and life, *Hollywood Ending* is notably more reserved on the matter of genius. Val's gifts are asserted time and again, but the plot renders them inconsequential. (His preliminary ideas—so radical they make the money men blanch—are to shoot partially handheld, and in black and white.) Allen takes a few swipes at the mystique of eccentric genius, but eventually opts to celebrate its smoke-screen qualities. In response to detractors who've complained that he might as well have been directing his recent movies with his eyes closed, Allen offers no refutation—if anything, he's downright thrilled at having gotten away with it.

The movie's punchline seems tailored for its Cannes premiere later this month. Festival director Gilles Jacob is billing Woody's imminent arrival as "an unimaginable event, a quasi-supernatural spectacle." It's only fitting that this churlish deity's belated visitation should finally take the form of an unambiguously backhanded valentine to his host nation.