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Hollywood Ending

Dir. Woody Allen. 2002. PG-13.

112mins. Allen, Téa Leoni, Treat Williams, Debra Messing.

The movie business is already so precariously over the top as to defy parody, but it is possible to pull it off with the right outsider perspective—iconoclast Robert Altman, for example, did it with the razor-sharp *The Player*. Woody Allen, whose admirably standoffish relationship with Hollywood is going on four decades, might have been able to do it at his peak. Instead, we get *Hollywood Ending*, an assortment of softball gags that make a pitifully weak rebuttal to the critics who have complained that Allen's films are increasingly out of touch with the times.

Allen stars as Val Waxman, a New York auteur who has fallen far and hard from his former Oscar-winning heights. When his producer ex-wife, Ellie (a deft Leoni), asks him to direct her big-budget pet project for the studio headed by her slick new beau (Williams), Waxman is desperate enough to sign on, even though he still has feelings for her. The situation would give anyone a headache, and Waxman, being a world-class hypochondriac, develops a case of hysterical blindness that he must hide throughout the production.

Allen mostly sticks to easy targets: hot-to-trot starlets, Hollywood's obsession with plastic surgery and, of course, nasty film critics. For every clever shot *Ending* lands, it coughs up two or three even lamer and more obvious than the following: Waxman: "I can't direct a movie, I'm blind!" His agent (Mark Rydell): "Have you seen some of the movies playing today?"

Although Allen's fast-paced, high-pitched direction prevents the groaners from lingering, the movie gives out completely when it slows down to explain the true impetus of Waxman's condition and fill in most of the plot holes. It's not a pretty picture, and with Allen's downward spiral continuing for at least three films now, maybe we should start crossing our fingers for a Hollywood ending to his career. (Opens Fri; see Index for venues.)—*Nicole Keeter*

FILM



A HANDY INDEX Allen gives Messing a pointer in his latest self-analytic comedy.