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Lightweight 'Wear' a flat fashion soufflé

By MARSHALL FINE
Gannett News Service

Robert Altman's "Ready to Wear" (formerly "Pret-a-Porter") calls to mind images of froth and fluffiness, of meringue or cotton candy.

Ultimately, this would-be satire of the fashion industry resembles them too closely, as an amusing confection that dissolves on the tongue but never makes it to the stomach.

A sprawling ensemble cast joins Altman in poking fun at the fashion industry. But the targets seem obvious and easy to hit. The film aspires to mere cleverness and doesn't hit that mark very often. "Ready to Wear" aspires to be like the bubbles in champagne — effervescent and heady — and more resembles a drink from which the carbonation has escaped.

The film is set in Paris during the annual pret-a-porter (ready to wear) fashion shows. Even as the shows are about to begin, the chief of the fashion council (Pierre Cassel) dies. Although he chokes on a ham sandwich, the circumstances make it look like murder and the police begin to investigate.

That's just one of several subplots that Altman weaves through the story he co-wrote with Barbara Shulgasser. Among others, he follows an egotistical, in-demand fashion photographer (Stephen Rea), who is being courted by three queen-bee fashion magazine editors (Linda Hunt, Sally Kellerman, Tracey Ullman); a sportswriter (Tim Robbins) shanghaied into covering the murder and forced to share a

Review

What: "Ready to Wear"

Starring: Marcello Mastroianni, Sophia Loren, Tim Robbins, Julia Roberts, Kim Basinger

Rating: R

Where: Opens Sunday at area theaters

Star rating: ★½ out of ★★

hotel room with another reporter (Julia Roberts); a buyer from Chicago (Danny Aiello) and his mistress (Teri Garr).

And then there are the designers themselves and a TV reporter, Kitty Potter (Kim Basinger), who pops up everywhere to ask questions like "Where do you get your fabulous ideas?"

Altman's point here is to make fun of an industry in which you can say something like "Shoulders are very fresh this year," and be considered profound. Basinger asks her vague, softball questions of both the film's fictional designers and of real designers at their actual shows (to Christian LaCroix regarding skirts: "Are we going to get poufed again?"). And they respond in sound bites that blend slang and formalistic jargon that's catchy but totally without substance.

If Altman's whole point is that the fashion world is shallow and superficial, well, gee: Why do you think they call it fashion? That there is backstage cattiness between effeminate designers isn't exactly a bulletin either — particularly when the talk is as low-key and unfunny as it is here.

"Ready to Wear" could have taken a sharp look at the manipulation



Miramax Films

A SLEW OF STARS, including Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren, appear in Robert Altman's poke at the fashion industry, "Ready to Wear."

of public taste, and of the ebb and flow of power and money behind the surface poofery. Instead, it makes fun of the superficiality — and isn't even particularly witty doing that. A running gag involving people stepping in dog doo sets the standard.

The obvious models here are "Nashville" and "Short Cuts," with Altman cross-cutting between several groups of people whose plots don't necessarily relate to each other. But the difference is the weakness of this material. There are too few characters in "Ready to Wear" about whom we know enough to care about. The best story lines — about the combative reporters sharing the hotel room or the three magazine editors after the photographer — are played equally against the less interesting ones.



JULIA ROBERTS and Tim Robbins play reluctant roommates.