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David Poland, MOVIECITYNEWS.COM



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Scarlett Johansson and Hugh Jackman star in Woody Allen's Scoop.

DEAD LINE

Scoop

review by M. Faust

Scoop opens the same way every Woody Allen movie has for the past 35-plus years: white titles on a black background. They're even in the same font, to which he by now should have some sort of proprietary right—call it "Woody" and put it on the list right there between *Wingedings* and *Zapf Dingbats*.

When someone has been doing something for so long, you can't expect them to change all that much. Allen surprised pretty much everyone with his last film, *Match Point*, both because it was made in London rather than his beloved Manhattan and because it was a serious film that cast new light on all the rest of his oeuvre—no mean feat for a filmmaker of 70.

With *Scoop*, though, Allen is back to the kind of lighthearted genre comedy that has dominated his later years, the movies he makes because they remind him of the ones he enjoyed in his youth (he names *The Thin Man* films and some of Bob Hope's comic mysteries as examples). He co-stars in the movie as Sid Waterman, a third-rate vaudeville magician and another example of the lower-rung show-biz types he's always regarded with affection: Sid could be a cousin of the smalltime talent agent in *Broadway Danny Rose*.

Scoop opens with a funny and promising scene: Recently deceased London reporter Joe Strombel (Deadwood's Ian McShane) is crossing the river Styx on the way to the afterlife. Like the dogged reporter he is, he tries to strike up a chat with the boat's tender, who, being the Grim Reaper, isn't giving up anything. This does lead to a conversation with another passenger, who gives Strombel a once-in-a-lifetime tip: The serial killer currently preying on London prostitutes may be Peter Lyman (Hugh Jackman), a rich and titled young businessman.

Determined not to let this scoop go to waste, Strombel makes his way back to the land of the living and contacts the first reporter he can. That turns out to be Sondra Pransky (*Match Point* co-star Scarlett Johansson), a student journalist from Brooklyn by way of Rochester on vacation in London. Though Sondra is more than a bit green (she's never heard of Jack the Ripper), the ghostly Strombel per-

suares her that this is a career-making story. With the help of Sid the magician, she searches for clues to Lyman's possible guilt, a search that becomes both easier and more difficult when they meet and fall in love.

Sondra and Lyman fall in love, that is, not Sondra and Sid. You may have worried there for a moment, given Allen's apparent reluctance to give up the role of romantic lead in his films. Sid is along simply as an excuse for Allen to kvetch and deliver more of the inexhaustible series of jokes he's been laddling out for years, mostly on the same set of themes. When he introduces some cocktail party chat about religion, you know it's only so that he can say, "I was born of the Hebrew persuasion but when I got older I converted to narcissism," and wonder how long he's been waiting to use that one.

You have to be able to appreciate the small pleasures in *Scoop* because, quite frankly, that's all it offers. On a scale of Allen's similar movies, it's a sight better than *Curse of the Jade Scorpion* or *Hollywood Ending*, though a notch below *Small Time Crooks* and *Manhattan Murder Mystery*. He builds too many scenes that go nowhere, like a poker game pitting card shark Sid against a table of English aristocrats, or getting himself locked into an antiques room in Lyman's house during a party. And while Sid isn't the main character of the story, he's the only source of humor.

I will say this for it, though: If you're a Woody Allen fan, even a lapsed one, it's comforting seeing him finally relaxing into old guy roles. He has a pleasant chemistry with Johansson, who nonetheless needs to work a little harder to resist becoming a Diane Keaton clone while working with him.

It's clear that while he may not consider *Scoop* terribly important Allen nonetheless likes the movie, and *Match Point* aside, his trifles tend to be more watchable than the more ambitious films. (I, for one, was ready to give up on him after *Anything Else* and *Melinda and Melinda*.) And working in London seems to agree with him, so the news that his next film is being made there gives cause for at least some hope.

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