

## Café Society

Woody Allen just keeps churning movies out, one or two a year, adding to his series of standard themes. This time it is another period piece, a nostalgia trip that allows him to dip back to the days of his birth and growing up. "Café Society," like "The Purple Rose of Cairo" (1985) and "Radio Days," (1987) taps the world of popular entertainment in the 1930's and, as he did in "Radio Days," Allen himself narrates the tale.

The tale concerns Bobby Dorfman (Jesse Eisenberg) son a Bronx jeweler (Ken Stott) and his wife (Jeannie Berlin) who is sent to Hollywood to get a position with his uncle Phil (Steve Carell), a noted agent to the stars. Fretful Bobby (doing yet another stand-in for Allen himself as a talky nerd) ultimately lands a job with Phil and promptly falls for his assistant, Veronica, nicknamed Vonnie (Kristen Stewart), who fends him off because she is already involved with an older married man named Doug. "Doug," it turns out, is none other than uncle Phil, struggling with the affair because he does not want to leave his wife. Meanwhile, Bobby and Vonnie have fallen for each other, but once she is pushed to choose between Phil and the young man, she chooses Phil.

Crestfallen Bobby returns to New York to work with his gangster brother Ben (Corey Stoll) at the latter's popular nightclub, where he finds a new spirit, quickly marries a lovely blonde, also named Veronica (Blake Lively), and settles in to the high life in the Big Apple. Even his brother's eventual conviction for murder doesn't affect the continued success of the club, which thrives on his notoriety. When Phil and Vonnie come to New York for a visit, the spark between her and Bobby seems re-kindled for an evening, only to wane as the two end up agreeing to go on with their separate lives.

Eisenberg is more irritating than ingratiating in the Allen template, and Stewart is alternately alluring and strangely sour as the (appropriately) two-faced Vonnie. Steve Carell is forced into an earnest, anxious role that uses little of his comic talent. The bulk of the cast is adequate in thinly developed roles.

In sum, "Café Society" seems middling Allen, amusing enough and with touches of poignancy but lacking characters that are particularly rich or endearing or complex. The director rings some familiar changes on his ample oeuvre, to wit: the dip into New York ethnic humor featuring Bobby's family, the caustic comparison between the Two Coasts (i.e., LA and NYC), the usual relationship tangle between protagonists where "true love" is a will-o'-the-wisp and where a much older man falls for a much younger woman, and the classic (and soothing) pop soundtrack of golden standards, here mainly dance band versions of Rodgers and Hart hits. This is all entertaining enough, just not stellar.

What is stellar in "Café Society" is the cinematography by the veteran Italian director of photography Vittorio Storaro, one of the masters of the cinema, who has worked with any number of prominent directors but never before for Woody. Among Allen films, this work ranks up there with the lustrous black-and-white look of his "Manhattan" (1979) achieved by another master, Gordon Willis.

Storaro's bi-coastal palate" is striking: crisp but workmanlike images for the Bronx sequences, spangly, lush décor for the night club scenes, and, especially, a luscious,

luminous warmth for much of the California sequences. A brilliant, star-bedecked LA party opens the film, for example, and a panoply of golden hues grace Hollywood's street and neighborhood scenes. A fellow who has graced the films of famed directors like Bertolucci, Coppola, and Carlos Saura has given this Woody Allen film a visual élan that this time transcends the story material.

*(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 96 minutes.)*

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