

Bullets Over Broadway

In *Bullets Over Broadway*, Woody Allen takes his very contemporary sensibility and immerses it in the Roaring Twenties, embracing openly all the period clichés--garret artists and mobsters, speakeasies and flappers, mugs and molls--and making them his own. As usual, his characters inhabit both literary and entertainment worlds, and, as usual, they are funny and vulnerable, most with self-doubt, looking wistfully for a relationship that will last. In this, his straightest comedy since *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), Woody has a winner.

In 1920's Manhattan, earnest playwright David Shayne (John Cusack) gets a great break when his latest effort finds an angel who will finance the entire project--but at a price. The backer, gangster Nick (Joe Viterelli), demands a major role in Shayne's play for his current squeeze, bimbo Olive Neal (Jennifer Tilly). Unnerved by Nick, but well-financed, David is able, together with his agent Julian Marx (Jack Warden), to get his pick of actors, including former star Helen Sinclair (Dianne Wiest). But David, the self-conscious artist, also discovers compromise. This means accepting Olive, adjusting lines to suit Helen and stomaching the constant presence at rehearsals of Cheech (Chazz Palminteri), a bodyguard Nick has assigned to his girl.

Rehearsals proceed reasonably well, but with comic hiccups. Olive, who "used to wiggle at that joint in Hoboken" is hopeless as an actress and her voice cuts like a Ginsu blade. Featured player Eden Brent (Tracey Ullman) is too perky by half and fawns over her irritating dog. Male lead Warren Purcell (Jim Broadbent) tends to overeat from nervousness. Grand Dame Helen is every temperamental faded actress--and will drink anything, even paint remover. David tries to keep the enterprise together, cajoling, ranting, reworking his precious lines as the show goes forward to opening night.

The plot turns on a delicious conceit: Cheech, who has been unobtrusively absorbing the play every day in the theater, makes a suggestion about a scene which all assembled realize is an improvement over David's text. Other such suggestions follow, and soon David is consulting heavily with Cheech at the latter's pool hall hangout. Soon, Cheech is doing full rewrites, and David realizes the play is becoming his. Tryouts in Boston hone the play, and opening night is a triumph. Although a new Broadway star is born, David realizes it isn't him and makes plans to go back to Pittsburgh with his girl Ellen (Mary-Louise Parker).

Bullets Over Broadway can be recommended unreservedly for Woodyphiles--or for anyone who likes sprightly comedy. It displays a rich range of roles from a typically varied Allen ensemble. It has steady wit and some great lines greatly set up, as he works for the first time with a new co-screenwriter Douglas McGrath, who in past lives has been a *New Republic* columnist and a "Saturday Night Live" writer. The script carries some minor anachronisms--David "feels conflicted" in the 1920s, and Eden uses the contemporary "just kidding" a couple times--but they don't deter the story's flow.

The film luxuriates in New York, as the best of Allen's movies do, using superbly the talents of two of his regulars, cinematographer Carlo Di Palma and production designer Santo Loquasto. New York in the Twenties may have been

a tinselly town, but here it looks sumptuous, as in one particularly gorgeous shot in Central Park, David and Helen bathed in a bevy of chrysanthemums. The score is a compendium of Twenties standards, and familiar tunes often comment on the plot, like the use of "Let's Misbehave" when Nick wants some action from Olive, or "Up a Lazy River" as a hit man dispatches a subject down at the docks. In his first period piece since *Radio Days* (1987), Mr. Allen and his colleagues capture the epoch splendidly.

As light and airy as it is, however, *Bullets* has another element familiar to Woody fans: the posing of a Big Question. The question this time--never really answered, of course--is: what are the demands of Art over Life? Does the true artist's vision admit of no compromise? Is that vision worth a life itself? Such musings, while most explicit in scenes of John Cusack with an unproduced playwright-friend (Rob Reiner), are not ponderous, but flow naturally from the story itself.

Woody Allen may not appear in this picture, but he certainly has a stand-in in Mr. Cusack, clearly Allen's alter ego. While he is his own person, Cusack also carries pieces of Woody's persona: disheveled look, goofy specs, messy hair, a person eager yet at sea, loquacious yet halting, capable of hyperventilating while overhearing a mobster's orders. I liked ever better Chazz Palminteri as Cheech, utterly convincing as a lifetime hood who is yet the intuitive artist. Palminteri was too little seen in the excellent *A Bronx Tale* last year, but he should get more notice after this outing. When this pug-ugly New Yorker, frustrated at the incompetence of the hapless Olive, grumbles that "I can't have her ruining my show," the line is both very funny--coming from the likes of him--and yet very real and poignant. Both Cusack and Palminteri especially shine in one lovely, unhurried scene in Cheech's bar. The extended scene, where the camera never moves, is both the midpoint and the turning point in the film, where the two characters get past their defenses and reveal their eventual fates.

As a "vain, Broadway legend," Dianne Wiest, in her fifth Allen film, is a compilation of every stereotyped star you've ever seen. She gets many of the best lines, too, as when, late for the first rehearsal, she explains her "pedicurist had a stroke plunging her orange stick into my toe." Or some of the ripest, as when Helen is praising poor David's playwrighting abilities: "They're your words. I'm just a vessel; you fill me." Jim Broadbent, an English actor (*Enchanted April* and *Widow's Peak*) does a fine comic turn as an overeater whose belly keeps protruding as the play keeps proceeding. Jennifer Tilly, as obnoxious Olive, must be deemed effective: her voice (which reminded me of Jean Hagen's in another 1920's send-up, *Singin' in the Rain*) is so grating that the viewer, along with Cheech, wants her rubbed out.

In a sense, the acting talent, as sometimes happens in Allen's films, is so abundant that not everybody can shine. Not that proven performers like Jack Warden, Tracey Ullman, Rob Reiner, and Mary-Louise Parker are wasted; there just isn't room enough for all of them in the script. Which doesn't stop Parker, however, from getting one of the film's zingers near the end. Reunited with her David after a fling, she admits: "For me, love is very deep; sex only goes a few inches." *Bullets over Broadway* may not be deep, but it offers one sweet time.

(“Bullets Over Broadway,” at several area theaters, is rated “R” for sexy talk.)

(November 1994)