

Film Review

Woody Allen's 'Cafe Society' is a disjointed meander

Woody Allen has outdone himself at age 80. Not only has he kept up his blistering pace of pushing out a movie a year, but this time he's really delivered two films, only loosely connected by jangling neurosis. "Cafe Society," starring Jesse Eisenberg as the sweet but awkward Allen stand-in, is a meandering look at lost love that is split between the highball-sipping, fur-wearing elite nightclubs of Manhattan and Hollywood in the 1930s. We never spend enough time in either location to really care about anyone there and so the film comes off disjointed and unconnected.

Allen seems both intrigued and repulsed by all the glamour and never keeps a consistent tone, just as his leading man stumbles trying to achieve coherence, seemingly alternating in every other scene from nebbish, stuttering clown to passive-aggressive bully to suave sophisticate. Allen narrates his own tale, but mostly tells the audience exactly what we're already seeing, undercutting his actors. There are a few gems in the script (including the line: "Life is a comedy written by a sadistic comedy writer") but the screenwriter is conflicted over whether he's writing a noir, a satire or a romantic comedy.

Allen's cinematographer is three-time Academy Award winner Vittorio Storaro, who combines with costume designer Suzy Benzinger and production designer Santo Loquasto, to recreate lush, gorgeous spaces filled with black ties and shimmering gowns, all elegantly lit. The soundtrack is also super, consisting of classics like "Jeepers Creepers" and "The Lady is a Tramp." Basically, the look and sound is jaw-dropping; the story at the center is ho-hum. The first half follows the New York-born Bobby Dorfman (Eisenberg) as he flees West for adventure in Tinseltown. His uncle (a very good

Steve Carell) is a high-powered yet insecure movie agent who puts him under his wing.

A broken romantic triangle sends Bobby back to New York pining for a lost love in the film's second half. He becomes a cool, glad-handing nightclub manager - odd, since he's supposed to be so self-conscious and internal - for his gangster brother (Corey Stoll, hitting the wiseguy bit a little hard). Bobby gets married to Blake Lively (whose job here is to simply wear dresses fabulously) and has a family.

What connects these stories is Kristen Stewart, a former assistant of Bobby's uncle who walks into the New York club one day like a ghost from the past, a scene as melodramatic as it sounds. Stewart is good at being cold; not so good here as the source of anyone's wild adoration.

The film, which never really catches a full head of steam, sort of peters out by the end. There are some wistful glances and the notion that people do foolish things. And that's about it. In "Cafe Society," the martinis are dry, stunning women fall for weirdos and irritating people are shot in the head and dumped in concrete, but all in good fun. We learn that men and women can love two people at once, and good people can cheat. No one really grows up. Even hookers are funny.

You'll end up feeling about the film like Bobby about Los Angeles - "half-bored, half-fascinated." And that's a pretty poor average, even for two poorly stitched-together films. "Cafe Society," an Amazon Studios release from Lionsgate, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "some violence, a drug reference, suggestive material and smoking." Running time: 96 minutes. One star out of four. — AP



In this image released by Lionsgate, Jesse Eisenberg, left, and Kristen Stewart appear in a scene from "Cafe Society." — AP



This file photo taken on September 20, 2015 shows winners of the award for Outstanding Drama Series for 'Game of Thrones' as they pose in the Press Room during the 67th Emmy Awards in Los Angeles, California. — AFP/AP photos

'Game of Thrones' tipped to top Emmys nods

Hollywood begins the run up to its annual prize-giving season today with "Game of Thrones" tipped once again to dominate the field at the announcement of the television industry's 2016 Emmy Awards nominations. The Television Academy's 19,000 members were given two weeks in June to sift through a crowded field of more than 8,000 entries from shows aired during the previous 12 months.

HBO's fantasy epic about noble families vying for control of the Iron Throne is expected to net a raft of nods after raking in a record-breaking 12 awards last year, including best drama series. The academy tends to nominate and vote conservatively, but this year could see a number of nods go to newcomers like USA's Golden Globe winner "Mr. Robot" and FX's hotly-tipped "The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story." Tried-and-tested favorites are nevertheless expected to dominate and "Downton Abbey" (PBS) will be hoping to bow out on a high after its last season.

The most star-studded category is likely to be best actor in a limited series or TV movie with the field led by six-time Emmy winner Bryan Cranston, who has received rave reviews for anchoring HBO's Lyndon B Johnson biopic "All the Way." Benedict Cumberbatch, Idris Elba and Anthony Hopkins will also be expecting nominations while other big name contenders in the category include Bill Murray and Johnny Depp. The topic of race is likely to figure heavily in the limited series category - formerly known as "outstanding miniseries" - with "The People v. O.J. Simpson" tipped to be matched up with historical saga "Roots" and ABC's "American Crime."

'Spectacular'

"Downton Abbey" picked up eight nominations last year but won only for "hairstyling" and will be hoping to mark its final season with a fourth nod in the prestigious outstanding drama category. Last

year's other drama nominees - "Breaking Bad" spinoff "Better Call Saul," "Game of Thrones," political thrillers "Homeland" and "House of Cards," and prison dramedy "Orange Is the New Black" - are all eligible again this year.

"With 'Homeland' and 'House of Cards' coasting on a perception they were 'better' this season, I think they're probably safe, and 'Downton Abbey' has that 'last season' glow," TV critic Daniel Fienberg said in a commentary for the Hollywood Reporter. "After a great second season, I'd hope 'Better Call Saul' only adds nominations and doesn't subtract, so 'Orange is the New Black' is vulnerable, especially with its comedy/drama ambiguity."

Academy members were able to select up to 10 programs per category but, unlike the Oscars, do not rank their choices for the Emmys, with nominees determined by a simple tally. There are seven

nominees in "comedy series" and "drama series" and six in the rest. Anthony Anderson, star of ABC's hit series "black-ish," and "Gilmore Girls" actress Lauren Graham will present the nominations for the 68th Emmy Awards at the Television Academy in Los Angeles.

Second round voting will take place from August 15 to August 29 while the awards, hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, will be broadcast live from the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles on September 18 on ABC. "Television is enjoying the most spectacular run in its history with breakthrough creativity, emerging platforms and dynamic new opportunities for our industry's storytellers," said Academy chairman Bruce Rosenblum. — AFP



In this Sept. 20, 2015 file photo, Viola Davis poses in the press room with the award for outstanding lead actress in a drama series for 'How to Get Away with Murder' at the 67th Primetime Emmy Awards in Los Angeles.

Dreams take flight for Pakistan's pigeon racers

A flock of pigeons take off from a Lahore rooftop at dawn, rising above the city's Mughal-era minarets before disappearing out of sight. Rather than being viewed as pests, these birds are champions of endurance who evoke a passionate following across Pakistan. "It is a love affair," says Akhlaq Khan, a famous octogenarian pigeon-fancier and author of the only book on the subject in Pakistan. "You don't see anything there, no difference between the birds," he says, cradling a plump bird with a white body and coloured head. "But I can tell the worth of each bird by looking at the eyes and feathers."

On his rooftop in a leafy district of Pakistan's cultural capital, hundreds of birds are cooing in massive light blue cages in the sweltering Punjabi summer. In film and folklore, pigeons, or "kabootar" are associated with love letters destined for harems and for military orders sent to champion warriors by kings of yesteryear. "Flying breeds in India were introduced by the Mughals," says Khan referring to the Muslim dynasty that ruled the subcontinent from the early 16th century till the mid-19th. Pigeon followers broadly class the birds into those known for their competitive flying ability, and those prized for their looks. Akbar the Great was renowned for his pigeon passion, and, according to one scholar of the court "had 20,000 birds of different types," said Khan.

The Bold and the Beautiful

Millions of fans across the country are enthralled by low and high altitude flying competitions, and races in which opponents attempt to distract each others' birds, etc. It is a rare pastime that brings together people from different social backgrounds - experts are often illiterate and the owners are rich. A good pigeon can be valued at hundreds of dollars, equivalent to several months salary for many Pakistanis.

Bird cages and enthusiasts can be found on rooftops in the old

A caretaker releases racing pigeons from their cage on the final day of the pigeon race national championship.



districts of cities across the country. Pakistani pigeons and experts have also been taken by Arab royals for tournaments in the Gulf. For so-called "high-flying" pigeons, the rules are simple: At dawn, each team of seven or eleven pigeons take off from their perches, spend the day flying out of sight, and when they return at nightfall, the flight time of each pigeon is added up and an average is calculated. The winning team is the one which has the longest average flight time after a total of seven or eleven flights held every two days.

"We fly pigeon around 5 in morning after stamping them, and if the pigeon comes back around 4 to 5 in the evening we consider them good," explains Syed Mehtab Shah, a participant in the

Bahrain Cup, one of a number of tournaments organized in spring and autumn. "I love beating my competitors, it brings me joy and fame," explains the pigeon-fancier from Islamabad, surrounded by several friends who have come to see his pigeons land one evening following an endurance flight. The conversation halts as two birds, which spent the day flying at 3,000 meters and are recognizable by the pink paint daubed under their wings, come in to land. Grabbing binoculars, the audience admire the birds' precision landing, which was guided by flags.

Alcohol and steroids

The best champions, capable of flying for more than 12 hours

without food or drink in exhausting heat, are showered with luxurious treatment often reserved for humans. The pigeon masters, known as "ustads," give their birds long massages with a damp towel and special concoctions to boost performance.

In his book, Khan reveals his diet plans for the winged athletes: Crushed almonds, cardamom and Indian lotus seed powder, as well as a "water of life" - laced with cumin, pepper and other spices. He speaks too of the benefits of port and whisky, illegal in Pakistan, precious saffron and ginseng. There is no governing body regulating pigeon racing, so other less natural ingredients can creep in to the diet. "Anabolic steroids, calcium tablets and sometimes sedative tablets are used," says Waqar Haider, a student of Akhlaq Khan, from Rawalpindi.

The victors can take home mobile phones, motorcycles and even cars - proving a winning bird in hand can be worth more than several in the proverbial shrubbery. In this way, the story of love became a story of money. "It fell into disrepute because people started gambling," explains Khan. And it has become necessary to deal with the inevitable jealousy. Haider's wife spends long hours peeling almonds and cooking for her husband's guests during each competition. She concedes shyly: "He spends more time with his birds with me." — AFP



In this photograph taken on May 30, 2016, a Pakistani racing pigeon owner feeds his pigeon after a day of flying during the pigeon race national championship in Islamabad. — AFP photos



A spectator uses binoculars as he watches pigeons fly overhead.



A caretaker counts racing pigeons before their release.



A caretaker holds a pair of racing pigeons after a day of flying during the pigeon race national championship.