

F I L M R E V I E W



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## Another movie of parody

The title of Barry Levinson's new movie, *What Just Happened*, is not phrased as a question, but if it were it would demand another question in response: "Who cares?" I'm asking in earnest. Who, exactly, do Levinson and the screenwriter, Art Linson, expect to invest time and interest — to say nothing of thought or feeling — in this meandering, passive-aggressive comedy of Hollywood inconsequence?

It's not as though the filmmakers themselves show much passion for the project beyond an evident love of the music of Ennio Morricone, a fondness for filming Los Angeles neighborhoods and Cannes hotels through the windows of moving cars, and a salutary appreciation of the efforts of a handful of first-rate actors. As it follows Ben, a harried movie producer played by Robert De Niro, through his complicated routines, *What Just Happened* achieves a tone of shrugging, studious detachment.

Clearly the picture's dry, cynical humor is intended as evidence of its satirical bona fides. Its knowing, understated mockery of movie-business business as usual is also a badge of authenticity. *What Just Happened*, populated by finely etched caricatures of anxious agents, preening directors and tantrum-prone stars (including Bruce Willis playing himself with a beard), knows what it's about, but this may not be such an impressive achievement.

Levinson, after all, is a veteran not only of Hollywood but of Hollywood satire (*Wag the Dog*), and Linson has had a long, eclectic career as a producer, with credits including *Car Wash*, *The Untouchables* and *Fight Club*. If the two of them can't make a realistic movie about moviemaking, who can? And surely the members of the cast, which includes Catherine Keener (as a studio boss), John Turturro (as an agent), Robin Wright Penn (as an ex-wife) and Sean Penn (as himself with a moustache), have ample firsthand knowledge of the ecosystem whose colorful species they lampoon.

The lampooning is sometimes funny and occasionally offers up a tidbit of small truth. But much of it is awfully familiar. The kind of self-flattering entertainment-industry self-mockery that

Hollywood power players skewer their own vanity and self-absorption in 'What Just Happened'

BY A. O. SCOTT

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Film Notes

WHAT JUST HAPPENED

DIRECTED BY: BARRY LEVINSON

STARRING:

ROBERT DE NIRO (BEN), CATHERINE KEENER (LOU TARNOW), SEAN PENN (SEAN PENN), JOHN TURTURRO (DICK BELL), MICHAEL WINCOTT (JEREMY BRUNELL), ROBIN WRIGHT PENN (KELLY), KRISTEN STEWART (ZOE), STANLEY TUCCI (SCOTT SOLOMON), BRUCE WILLIS (ACTOR)

RUNNING TIME: 110 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

*What Just Happened* offers has become a staple of the entertainment industry, animating everything from *Entourage* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to *Tropic Thunder*. It is now routine for movie-world insiders to send up their own vanity and self-absorption by reproducing it with just enough exaggeration to make the rest of us feel like insiders too.

It's not a bad feeling — just, at this point, a little empty and ritualistic. De Niro, his brows knit somewhere between irritation and sincere concern, his face roughened by silvery stubble, is fun to watch. He's such a nimble, subtle comedian when he wants to be that you can only wish he wanted to be more often.

As Ben ricochets between flailing projects, ex-wives and awkward meetings, muttering into his hands-free cellphone earpiece, he proves that narcissism loves company. And De Niro, mixing it up with his co-stars — with Turturro at a nail salon; with Willis on set; with Wright Penn in what Ben calls his "ex-bed" — he strikes a few sparks of genuine comic insight.

But *What Just Happened*, for all the trompe-l'oeil accuracy of its situations and locations, serves up far too many warmed-over morsels of humor: the Hollywood funeral where expressions of grief take second place to schmoozing and BlackBerrying; the preening, unstable British auteur (Michael Wincott, following in the footsteps of Steve Coogan and Richard E. Grant); the icy studio boss; the lunches and test screenings and meetings and awkward social encounters. We've seen all of this before — though maybe not with Bruce Willis in a yarmulke — and I suspect that only someone who lived in or near this world would want to see it all again.

And even in that case, maybe not so ardently. To come back to the question I began with, the most striking (and perhaps the most revealing) aspect of *What Just Happened* is its lack of conviction. Its point — that the daily personal and professional habits of the Hollywood elite are silly and solipsistic — is easy enough to grasp and to accept. But true satire works correctively and by antithesis, arriving at an implication of virtue through the faithful representation of vice.

In other words, it is not enough to expose shallowness and duplicity unless you have some notion of what depth or honesty might look like. And this movie fails to be as funny as it should be because it has no idea of what to take seriously. Setting out to skewer the triviality of the movie business, Levinson and Linson have made a trivial movie. Which may only be to say that *What Just Happened* fulfills its ambitions perfectly.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Buttonman 鈕扣人

"There are no good people in the world, just people with different levels of bad," says the poster for this moody, intriguing underworld saga. Francis Ng (吳鎮宇) stars as the title character, a triad fix-it man who cleans up after killings and leaves nothing behind for the authorities to investigate. Things turn sour for our antihero when his associate in organ plundering is killed and his girlfriend gets it on with his trainee. This is the first feature from Taiwanese director Chie Jen-hao (錢人豪), though the film was financed by Hong Kong investors. Screening exclusively at Spring Cinema Galaxy in Ximending, Taipei.



The Sparrow 文雀

Charismatic actor Simon Yam's (任達華) characters have swung from the truly repellent (*Dr Lamb*) to the heroic (*Bullet in the Head*), but whatever the movie, he delivers. In this unusual film, Yam stars as a Hong Kong "sparrow" (pick-pocket) who, together with his petty criminal friends, meets his match in a female admirer from China (Taiwan's Kelly Lin Hsi-lei, 林熙蕾). *Sparrow* took a long time to make and won't reach a big audience, but it deserves a look, not least for a pickpocketing climax to end them all. As with *Buttonman*, you'll have to go to Spring Cinema Galaxy in Ximending to catch this one. Directed by Johnnie To (杜琪峰), whose consultants for the film's pickpocket scenes included professional thieves and ballet dancers.



Getting Home 落葉歸根

Established Chinese director Zhang Yang (張楊) adapts a true story for the screen, earning plaudits around the world for an award-winning film of humanity, humor and unobtrusive satire. A man whose workmate and friend dies as the two are drinking decides to honor a promise the deceased had made to him — take his body to his home village after passing on. Thus follows an odyssey of strange encounters with people across half the Chinese countryside as the man (played with restraint by comedian Zhao Benshan, 趙本山) struggles with the task of single-handedly transporting a corpse.



Outlander

A spacecraft crash-lands in Norway in the time of the Vikings, and the locals don't take to one of its occupants (Jim Caviezel, who played Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*) too kindly when he shows up in their kingdom. Eventually the king (John Hurt) and his men see the wisdom of letting "Outlander" deal with a creature even more strange and dangerous. This movie took even longer to complete than *Sparrow*, but early critical reaction was less than kind, which might explain the delay of its US release to sometime next year.



Paris

Hard to think of a movie title that might bite off more than it can chew than this one (perhaps excepting *Australia*, which opens on Dec. 24), but Francophiles should be delighted with a trip to *Paris*: It's got all the self-absorption, fine acting, photogenic locations and quirkiness you could ask for — and no plot intrusions by ethnic violence or threats of terror attacks. Juliette Binoche is a social worker who helps her dancer brother cope with a career-threatening ailment, setting in motion the introduction of characters both funny and appalling as the city unfolds before the viewer.



The Sky Crawlers

This is a contemplative, award-winning anime from director Mamoru Oshii (*Ghost in the Shell*), who focuses on permanently youthful pilots fighting and dying in battles for public entertainment in what resembles a Nipponese aerial *Rollerball* with Orwellian trimmings. *Variety* called it a "labored parable," perhaps helping to explain its failure in Japanese theaters, but the *Japan Times* was more supportive, in particular lauding the battle sequences, said to be "thrilling in a primal, adrenaline-pumping way."



Ikigami: The Ultimate Limit

Like *The Sky Crawlers*, *Ikigami* is set in a Japan of the future in which the government sanctions the murder of a small proportion of the population as an incentive for the rest to be good cogs in the wheel (presumably this is the same administration that will launch live-to-air contests of teens killing teens, as depicted in *Battle Royale*). Government operative Shota Matsuda is one of the *Men in Black*/Meet Joe Black types who helpfully give victims 24 hours' notice of their fate. Based on a manga, as if you hadn't guessed.



Dragon Hunters

Finally, a European animated co-production in English and French that has eyes on Pixar's market — in Europe at least. In feudal times, two dragon hunters of dubious motivation are forced by circumstances into hunting down their scaly, ruthless prey. Like the Singaporean animation *Zodiac: The Race Begins* that was released here back in May, this film apparently suffers from an imbalance between the quality of the animation and the effort put into story and characterization, though the visuals themselves might interest aficionados. The rest may just see a cinematic video game.



# Horizontal collaboration, and other exploits

It's 'Basic Instinct' meets 'The Pianist' in Paul Verhoeven's latest release about a Jewish woman who falls for a Nazi

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Paul Verhoeven's supremely vulgar romp *Black Book* takes off in September 1944. A young Jewish woman, the unsinkable Rachel Stein — played with ferocious energy by the Dutch actress Carice van Houten — has been squirreling herself away with a Christian farm family when an American bomber blows their house to smithereens.

Not one to let an Allied payload cramp her style, Rachel picks herself up, dusts herself off and flings herself into the open arms of a passing swain, the first in a series of dashing rescuers who will accompany her through tangles of intrigue and steamy romances in a Holocaust story like few others.

Having first earned international attention with crudely effective Dutch entertainments like *Soldier of Orange*, Verhoeven went Hollywood, starting in the late 1980s, with increasingly slicker, steadily less effective entertainments like *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*. *Black Book* is the

first film he has shot in his native country in more than 20 years, and it shows in its vigor, in the strained seams of its construction and in its willful irreverence toward its subject — particularly its insistence that there are no obvious villains, even in the middle of a Nazi occupation. Written by Verhoeven and his sometimes screenwriter, Gerard Soeteman, *Black Book* encompasses the best and very worst of its director's signature pulp brutality.

Despite the non-Hollywood genesis of the project, *Black Book* relies on the same formula that has fueled Verhoeven's big-studio career, namely frenzied sex and violence, bodies thrashing with the ecstasy of coitus and thrashing into paroxysms of death, sometimes at the same time. The thrashing rarely lets up in *Black Book*, a film in which a Jewish woman's body is saved from the off-camera death camps, gas chambers and ovens to become a site of negotiation, a means of survival and an erotic spectacle. Abused and misused, stripped and stripped again, Rachel — named, it's worth noting, for the mother of Israel — survives by masking that body with a putatively Aryan disguise. She also falls for a Nazi.

Not any old Nazi, but the head of the Gestapo in The Hague, where Rachel has landed after fleeing an ambush that claims her brother and parents. Now working for the resistance, Rachel signs up for the



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ultimate Mata Hari assignment and agrees to bed Ludwig Muntze (Sebastian Koch) so she can uncover Gestapo secrets. She does that and more. After dyeing her hair a brassy blond, Rachel insinuates herself into the superdashing Nazi's confidences and, soon enough, his bedroom. It takes just one glance at the top of her head with its creeping dark roots for Muntze to guess the truth. Grasping her naked breasts in her hands, Rachel pleads her case with Shakespearean gravitas, "Hath not a Jew, er, eyes?"

Yowza! In truth, Rachel — now called Ellis — asks of her breasts and then her hips, "Are these Jewish?" Seduced by the pertness of her argument or perhaps that of her physicality, attractively framed by black garters and stockings, Muntze answers her

question silently but firmly. Taken in by his sensitivity and, no doubt, his decision to spare her life — during one pillow talk, this nice Nazi shares how his wife and children died in an Allied bombing — Rachel finds herself forced to navigate an increasingly ticklish line between duty and desire. It's a line made all the more wobbly by the pileup of plot complications that Verhoeven wildly races through, giving the film the frantic feel of an old-time movie serial on methamphetamine.

Verhoeven's cartoon realism, accentuated by the sitcom lighting, the primitively staged gun battles, the gnashing teeth, whizzing bullets and thundering score, has its hard-surface appeal. Designed for distraction, *Black Book* works only if you take it for the pulpiest

of fiction, not a historical gloss, its stated claims to "true events" notwithstanding. It also helps if you don't worry about its loosey-goosey moral relativism, which, among other things, involves one character's stating that at least some of the Dutch are no better than the Nazis, a point that Verhoeven tries to enforce by reconfiguring an outrage from Brian de Palma's horror classic *Carrie*. Dumping a bucket of human feces on your heroine certainly makes a point. Given the signal-to-noise ratio here, it's too bad that Verhoeven doesn't spend more time on the film's most provocative image, which shows a Holocaust survivor tucked behind a barbed-wire fence on an Israeli kibbutz in 1956 and indicates that Jewish survival remains a never-ending story.