

Episode 7 - Scoop (2006)

Music - Swan Lake

Introduction

SCOOP is the 36th film written and directed by Woody Allen.

Woody Allen stars as Sid Waterman, also known as The Great Splendini. An American magician on tour in London, he meets a young journalism student named Sondra Pransky, played by SCARLETT JOHANSSON, and the pair become involved in a dead journalist's final story. The investigation is to uncover the identity of the Tarot Card Killer. Can it really be the charming Peter Lyman, played by HUGH JACKMAN?

SCOOP reunited Allen with SCARLETT JOHANSSON and London. The three had just seen massive success together with MATCH POINT the year before in 2005. But as usual for Allen, he had already started making Scoop well before Match Point was even released. Coming off that acclaimed murder drama, Scoop seems unbearably light weight. Seen in isolation though, Scoop stands up a lot better, and it's a bit of fun.

Welcome to the Woody Allen Pages podcast, from me, the creator of the Woody Allen Pages website. This week, episode seven, we look at 2006's SCOOP. We'll look at how the film got made, what I love and didn't love, and plenty of fun facts. Of course, spoilers are everywhere - so go watch the film first.

JANE: I believe I was poisoned because I was on the verge of confirming a terrible suspicion.

JOE: Yes? What suspicion is that?

JANE: That Peter Lyman is the serial killer known to the police as the Tarot Card Killer.

Conception and story

The real place where SCOOP starts - the reason for the film existing - was how well Allen and Johansson got on during the making of MATCH POINT. In particular, Allen and Johansson would banter back and forth on set and insult each other the way comedians often do. So Allen wanted to put that on screen, as both were eager to work together again. So he needed a comedic idea.

That film idea didn't come easily. Allen worked on at least two ideas as the follow up to MATCH POINT, to be filmed in London, that he ultimately abandoned. A third idea, SCOOP, was written in just 12 weeks, in time for production. But the spark was an older idea that Allen had kicked around for years.

That idea was a journalist who was so dogged that even death couldn't stop him from solving one last case. Allen has said this film was a bit of a tribute to journalism. Joe Strombel, the dead journalist played by IAN MCSHANE, is nothing but a good man. He has no flaws or doubts, and his work mates talk about him like he's the greatest journalist that ever lived.

FUNERAL SPEAKER: Don't mourn for Joe Strombel. Joe Strombel led a full life. A newspaperman in the best tradition. A great credit to the fourth estate. It didn't matter if the bombs in the war zone were falling. It didn't matter how high up the political scandal went, or how many big corporations or small-time racketeers leaned on him. Whatever the risk, if there was a story there, Joe went after it. And he usually got it.

Perhaps its more accurate that Allen wanted to pay tribute to journalism films, like BILLY WILDER's THE FRONT PAGE or ALL THE PRESIDENTS MEN, the latter of which is referenced in the film.

Allen originally had an older journalist in his mind for the lead in this story. But he wanted to make another film with Johansson, so he made her character a college journalist (and made her an exchange student to justify her being an American). The journalism story soon turned it into a buddy comedy about two unlikely friends investigating a charming socialite and a potential killer. Allen also talked about detective comedy films like 1934's THE THIN MAN as inspiration for this film. That 1934 film was about a former police detective and his wife trying to unravel a mystery, done in that kind of sparkling 30s style where everyone says all the rights things and there's not a hair out of place.

The THIN MAN like quick witted banter between Allen and Johansson is one of the best things about SCOOP, and they spend a lot of time together. Even the character names, Sid and Sondra, seem to sound like the leads of THE THIN MAN - Nick and Nora.

Allen also had the idea of the murder. Allen reckons he often comes up with ideas for murders, and I hope he means murders that would make good film plots. And this one isn't too bad, and unfolds well. That there is a real serial killer out there, but someone also throws in a couple of opportunistic copycat murders definitely works as good film plot.

So we have a pretty classic detective story. Allen sets up the rules of a journalism film. You can't just accuse or trap someone. You can't go to the police. You have to find the clues and build the case. It's kind of how they do it in ALL THE PRESIDENTS MEN. Which sets us up on our journey.

JOE: if it turns out to be Lyman, this will be the biggest story to hit London since Jack the Ripper.

SONDRA: "Jack the Ripper." Is that capitalized?

JOE: There's no knowing where he'll strike next, but more women will be murdered until he is stopped.

SONDRA: That's horrible! We have to notify the police.

JOE: No, no. What kind of reporter are you? That would be a disaster! God, no! He's a respected millionaire. You can't accuse anyone, let alone someone like that without substantial proof. And once you've alerted him to the suspicion, that he is under suspicion, then he'll be impossible to trap. Not to mention doubly dangerous. There's also a possibility that he poisoned his secretary because he suspected that she was learning the truth. No, you have to get the story first, but first you have to get the story right!

The question throughout the film is whether Peter Lyman is the Tarot Card killer. The script keeps Peter mysterious and at a distance. We never see his point of view until the very end of the film, when his true nature is revealed.

We also love our bumbling heroes in Sid and Sondra, so we believe their suspicions. We know Joe Strombel isn't wrong. There are also no other suspects - it's only Lyman. It's not really a whodunnit when there's only one suspect involved. But Allen keeps the question open the whole time - we are never truly sure.

There's the good scene at the newspaper office, which was the real offices of The Guardian. The editor there, played wonderfully and with authority by CHARLES DANCE, gives our heroes the bad news - that they don't have a story and that the real killer has been caught. It's worth noting how the editor is another heroic figure. He's also nothing but a good man. The investigation hits a pretty solid brick wall - and it up ends us as an audience.

MR MALCOLM: Well, it's very vivid and rather shocking, and there are some genuine circumstantial bits of evidence. But let me give you a lesson in professional journalism. No newspaper should or would ever run this story.

SONDRA: What? Why?

MR MALCOLM: It would be fatally irresponsible and libelous. All you have here are a number of titillating speculations. Flamboyant theories that tarnish a man, and a well-known figure at that, without a single shred of substantial proof.

It's a good moment in a mystery that doesn't otherwise keep you on the edge of your seat. Like I said, it's not really a whodunnit. The film simply changes to what's the deal with Peter Lyman, which is kind of what we've been doing for the whole film anyway.

The best thing about this film is clearly the leads, and watching Allen and Johansson just chew it up by being incredibly silly. There is a whole small bit where they follow the wrong person for a while, which is so wildly stupid you wonder why it's in the film. Until you realise that this is the film. This is a very stupid film, and you kind of have to go with it.

But the silliness is also character work. The tension throughout the film isn't really finding out the identity of the Tarot Card Killer. The tension comes from watching Sid and Sondra better themselves. They are the wrong people with the right information. When they track down Peter Lyman by the pool, they aren't smart enough to come up with a cover story first. They aren't Joe Strombel, who would solve the case expertly. But they are good people, and our heroes. Can they reach above the losers that they are and solve the mystery? Well that's the heart of the film.

SONDRA: You know what? Forget you, all right. I'll do this on my own. I don't need you. Go back to your card tricks.

SID: I didn't say I wouldn't help you. You know, I just... It has to be done properly.

You know, we gotta put our heads together.

SONDRA: If we put our heads together, you'll hear a hollow noise.

Of course, a good mystery on film is all about how the mystery it's revealed, and the various twist and turns. Allen does a pretty good job of stringing us along, although some of the clues are clumsy. Sid just happens to pull an envelope from a bag that has a name that he later needs. Sondra manages to find the Tarot cards at a crucial moment, just when she thought her suspicions were wrong. They just happen to be in a restaurant, sitting at the right seats, to watch Peter walk by on Sondra's birthday.

Also clumsy is the magical element. There is a mystical conceit at the heart of the film. But the exact way, or even the unexact way, of how Joe Strombel manages to get back to the living, or how long he can stay or not, or why he

appears, is never really discussed.

The magic stuff is just an excuse to kick along the plot. Joe Strombel appears just as the plot needs him to, dropping clues. Just as Sondra loses faith, he appears. Just as Sid loses faith, he appears. It's too convenient but it's not that part of the story that concerns Allen. There was a longer sequence with the

recently dead that was cut, which kind of shows that Allen didn't really care for that supernatural stuff. Perhaps he wrote more about the rules - but it's not what he was interested in.

The magic stuff works a little bit better when Allen uses it for humour. Allen has fun playing a magician, and there's some funny jokes about magic tricks. Allen of course is an amateur magician, and has loved it since he was a child. Sid being a magician doesn't hugely bother the plot, but it makes for some fun sequences.

Also clumsy in my book is the ending. None of the story resolutions for the three characters stick the landing for me.

Sid dies in a car accident. There is a small line where Sid talks about the fear of dying in a car accident - which is the smallest set up for his fate. But it's not a satisfying pay off. His sacrifice doesn't mean anything. I like Sid as a character, and it's fun to see him in the afterlife. But he's not very memorable, and he doesn't learn anything or go anywhere. The small subplot about him being lonely and divorced is never paid off.

SONDRA: Do you have a family?

SID: I had a wife, but she dumped me, if you can believe that.

SONDRA: Somehow...

SID: She thought I was immature and that I never grew up. Now, I had a great rebuttal for her. I could have nailed her, you know, but I raised my hand and she would not call on me.

Peter's comeuppance comes through his own stupidity. He throws Sondra off the boat but doesn't check that Sondra drowns. In fact - he rows away. It so dumb. Sondra has the initial meeting with Peter where she pretends to drown, but we never sense it to be important. I just can't help but nag at why Peter didn't make sure she drowned. Maybe he didn't want to look.

That the drowning conceit being how Peter is caught lacks any sort of dramatic irony. It would be better if Sondra had to pretend that she couldn't swim a few more times, that it was a lie she had to maintain. Or maybe that Sondra knew that Peter planned to drown her and she was actually a few steps ahead. Instead the ending, when Sondra reappears, is unsatisfying

dramatically. And Allen has to make Peter very stupid for it to work.

SONDRA: What are you thinking about?

PETER: You really want to know SONDRA: Yes.

PETER: Just how ironic life is, and tragic.

SONDRA: Why?

PETER: Well, that I met you by rescuing you from drowning and found you totally enchanting and now we've come full cycle and, alas, you're going to have to drown.

SONDRA: What?

Of all the endings for the leads, Sondra has the best of it. She has learnt something, I guess. But even then, she didn't get the story. Sid got the story - she got lucky not to be killed and Peter revealed himself, she didn't oust him. She hasn't really learnt to be a better journalist, we are just told she's now a better journalist. It's hard to imagine she goes off to be a great journalist from now on.

When the mystery is no good, and it's all about whether our loveable losers can rise to the occasion, it feels a waste that our characters don't get that big hero moment where they outsmart the bad guy.

SID: The man is a liar and a murderer. And I say that with all due respect.

Allen usually makes films as a reaction to whatever he made last. And his last film was MATCH POINT, still possibly his darkest and most intense film. So we get one of Allen's lightest, breezier films in response. Oddly enough, Allen had the title of SCOOP during production, and was talking about it when promoting MATCH POINT. He usually doesn't decide on titles this early, or at least he doesn't reveal them to the press.

Of course, it was set in London like MATCH POINT. But there's nothing particularly London about this film either. Allen had the murder idea and made it work for London. You can easily imagine this being set in New York with only minor rewrites. Allen has to do some script gymnastics to make it work for an American magician and an American exchange student to be the leads in a film set in London.

There's also very little about the film that has to do with 2006. That reverence for journalism, and Allen's influences, are once again very old fashioned. The idea of the unassailable newspaper man has long gone. In fact, the UK was just about to be rocked by a major journalism scandal when it was revealed some papers were hacking phones. Which also brings up another point. Does Sondra not have a mobile phone?

Finally, this film just isn't about anything. At best it's about great journalism,

or journalism films. But there's no deeper philosophy that's in Allen's great comedies like *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO* or *ZELIG*. Even to go to more modern films, the crowdpleasers like *MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT* and *MIDNIGHT IN PARIS*, those are about something. This is about nothing. This feels more in line with *THE CURSE OF THE JADE SCORPION* and *HOLLYWOOD ENDING* as a bit of a laugh and little else.

It sounds like I'm really having a dig at this film. And I guess that's true because I want to go deep and when you go deep in this film, there's some pretty major flaws. But the thing he does care about is to entertain and make you laugh. Allen's filled the script with great quips and silly situations. That's the part he does cares about. We are also back in the world where Allen, or the character he plays, gets to make very silly quips and no one around him reacts or even laughs. That's the kind of film we are in.

SONDRA: If I ate that much bread, I'd be 20 pounds heavier.

SID: See, I never gain an ounce, because, you know, my anxiety acts like aerobics. So I get the exercise.

SONDRA: Thanks for taking me out for my birthday, Sidney.

SID: Well, you know, you're the daughter that I never had.

SONDRA: Oh, that's so... No, no, I'm kidding. I'm kidding. 'Cause I never wanted to have kids. I didn't. Because you have kids, what is it? You know, you're nice to them, you bring them up, you suffer, you take care of them and then they grow up and they accuse you of having Alzheimer's.

Production, cast and crew

Allen shot the film in London, his second in a row following *MATCH POINT*. By all accounts production went smoothly. We know of a few deleted scenes, like the scenes with the recently dead, and more of Sondra and Peter in love. It certainly doesn't feel like anything is missing. Allen is not afraid to deliver a short film.

London looks gorgeous. It helps that Allen films in West London, with its beautiful terrace houses and leafy streets. Allen copped some criticism that he showed the safest, most affluent side of London. But the story is about rich people. Sid stays in a pretty average hotel, and he takes Sondra to a regular Indian meal, not a fancy one. The upper class houses, when we see them, fit with the story.

SID: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, you're an incredible audience and I mean that sincerely. I say that from the bottom of my heart. You know, every time I come to London, this great city, I always get a sincere sensation, because you're marvelous people, beautiful humans.

There's something to be said about Peter Lyman's very chic house, located in the posh part of Ladbroke Grove. A lot of the film is set there and I imagine Allen and his team had to find the right house, with a room for the vintage instruments. Haseley Court in Oxfordshire serves as the Lyman country estate. In those scenes, it almost seems like Allen has invaded some sort of BBC countryside detective drama.

SID: They have a class system. He's an aristocrat, and, you know, we're commoners. In fact, according to his system, I think we're probably classified as scum.

There's also use of the great Royal Albert Hall, which Allen would go on to perform at with his band. A very special shout out to Shepherd's Bush Empire, one of the best music venues on the planet, which serves as where The Great Splendini performs. We see the Shepherd's Bush Empire backstage area which is normally full of old rock posters. The production team covered them up with new posters, possibly due to copyright of having band logos, but probably to keep with Allen's preference for warm colours.

The film looks great, and I credit it to cinematographer is REMI ADEFARASIN, who also shot MATCH POINT. He nails the red warm tones that Allen loves so much. Allen talked a bit about how much he liked working in Britain, with less union restrictions. On a very small level, it meant that less people were involved and it seems more controlled. Allen wanted to work with Adefarasin again for his next film, but he was already committed to filming ELIZABETH THE GOLDEN AGE.

SCARLETT JOHANSSON is very funny. She hasn't been known for her comic work, and even her funny films like JOJO RABBIT she mainly expected to be beautiful. Whereas here she is dressed down and pretty hilarious, holding her own against Allen, with great one liners. I particular love all the ridiculous references to dentistry, the profession held by her family. It's an oddly philosophical joke - that Sondra is a born dentist, fighting against her true nature.

Allen and Johansson obviously hit it off and banter back and forth - and its what Allen wanted to capture onscreen. Some of it was likely improv and they clearly make each other laugh, often dancing around each other in long unbroken takes. She feels like a character LOUISE LASSER, Allen's second wife, would play in a way. Sondra is the character that is slightly smarter than Sid,

but doesn't understand her own appeal to men.

There's scenes where they break character just a little. There's a moment where Johansson snorts with a laugh and Allen decided to keep it in. By all accounts, she and Allen laughed all the way through the production.

SONDRA: Sorry. I need those. You see, I can't wear contacts. I don't like to put my finger on my eyeball.

Coming off MATCH POINT and then thinking about the upcoming VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA, it's amazing to think what an incredible range she has, at such an early age. She can play dark, she can play funny and she can spit out dialogue at speed. She really just fits Woody Allen's world. And in all the talk of muses, she's one of his best.

HUGH JACKMAN is almost too well cast. He is incredibly great as Mr Charming. He's almost a plastic Disney prince - but he's incredibly likeable. More than being good in the role, it's good casting because the audience brings their understanding of the actor and his persona along for the ride. And Jackman is an absolutely nice guy.

But we also know he can play the tough guy, and audiences were just starting to see his dark side in roles in films like THE PRESTIGE (which also came out in 2006 and also starred SCARLETT JOHANSSON). So we're left to question which one he will be in this film? The nice guy or the tough guy. I doubt Allen thinks about these things so I assume kudos to casting director JULIET TAYLOR on this one.

IAN MCSHANE is pretty great. McShane was riding high, his career having a second act with his starring role in the series DEADWOOD. He's not on screen very much, and he doesn't have a huge range to hit. But he has to be clever, charming and charismatic as soon as you see him. He's all those things and more.

JOE: I'm Joe Strombel, reporter, and I have the scoop of the decade about the Tarot Card murder case. I mean if it pans out, it'll be fantastic. It's got everything. Big names, murder, prostitution.

SID: I'm going to start agitating your molecules.

JOE: You're a journalist. I've got some information for you. Big story. Big, big, big scoop.

The supporting cast is great. We're in England, and there's just an overflow of incredible actors. FENELLA WOOLGAR is utterly charming as Peter Lyman's dead assistant who we meet at the start of the film. ROMOLA GARAI is great as the confident and bawdy Vivian, the friend of Sondra who she lives with. The

cops, who appear for a few seconds are played by the great ALEXANDER ARMSTRONG and the great ANTHONY HEAD. They do nothing. You just see these people here for a minute, who would normally headline their own BBC series.

Not that Allen made too big a deal of it. All these British actors who loved Allen were lining up to work with him, and happy to take extremely minor roles. In auditions, Allen usually gives people a few seconds, doesn't say a word and

sends them on their way. While casting in Britain for something, his casting director JULIET TAYLOR told him he had to take a bit more time with some of them, because they were actual knights with 'sir' in their titles.

Even on set, he didn't really speak to many of the people who waited decades to work with him. CHARLES DANCE says that he turned up in his own clothes, spoke to no one, did his lines, and went home.

His hands off directing style aside, let's not forget Allen as an actor. Allen looks like he's having fun and he's full of energy. He's chewing up the screen with his silly magic tricks and enjoying delivering his silly one liners.

This is his last significant role in one of his own films. He has a small role in TO ROME WITH LOVE, and he would star in the series CRISIS IN SIX SCENES. But here he's playing a significant film role for one last time, and it's probably his best performance since 1997's DECONSTRUCTING HARRY.

Allen made a lot of grumbling around this time about not wanting to act anymore. The success of MATCH POINT would really free him up, and the people around him would stop asking him to appear on screen. But that success hadn't come by the time he started on SCOOP. Still, there's an element of Allen saying goodbye to this sort of film here as well. Joe Strombel has one last story he wants to pursue. And Allen has one more comic adventure before he steps away from onscreen antics to focus on writing and directing. Feels a little like a last hurrah.

WOMAN: How did you get here?

SID: Me? I couldn't get used to driving on the goddamn wrong side of the street! You know, I was driving up to the country, and in the United States, I would have been a hero. I would have saved her. I would have... But here, you know... That's the one drawback of living in London. Granted, the theater's better, there's many good Indian restaurants...

Allen continues his rough rule of saving American jazz for his American films. It's interesting that he doesn't see Jazz as working in a British setting. Instead he uses various classical recordings, and some pretty popular ones too.

There is a fair bit of TCHAIKOVSKY, the Russian composer. In particular

there's a couple of pieces from the hugely popular ballet SWAN LAKE and the hugely popular ballet THE NUTCRACKER. Swan Lake is used for the opening credits music. There's a bit of Strauss and the Peer Gynt Suite. It is very commercial and popular classical music. Which I guess fits with the upper class setting of the film.

The emotional effect of the music is a peppy, pleasing, exciting score. But it also sounds like a SCOOBY DOO cartoon or something. It's very cartoonish and familiar. There's actually a commercially available soundtrack for the film, and it works as a nice introduction to classical music used in ballet.

Release and reception

SCOOP was released in the US on 28 July 2006, with a red carpet screening at MoMA in New York a couple of nights earlier. It was produced by BBC Films in the UK, yet it never reached cinemas there. Instead it played on TV, essentially becoming a TV movie in the country it was made, and not shown until 2009. It would only be released on UK DVD in 2015, almost a decade later.

FOCUS FEATURES would distribute the film in the US and it's the only Allen film they ever worked on. Because of this, it's sometimes hard to find SCOOP as a DVD or part of a box set - it's release was a bit of a one off. Still, the film made almost \$40 million, well and truly above its meagre budget of around \$4 million.

Allen is very out of time with this film. This film really had nothing to do with the rest of cinema in 2006. The cinemas were full of superheroes and Pixar. HUGH JACKMAN at the time was already a very famous superhero.

Critically, SCOOP was a bit of a letdown after the finely taut and visceral MATCH POINT. MATCH POINT was full of depth and was Allen's longest film. SCOOP was light as air and breezed by at just over 90 minutes. MATCH POINT also took a long time to roll out and in the US. So SCOOP only came only 6 months after it was released in cinemas (and just over two months after MATCH POINT was released on DVD). So it really wasn't given much of a chance.

Not that it really deserves one. Allen admittedly knocked the script out in record time and it shows. There's plot holes in the script, but there's an interesting detective story here.

The saving grace is, once again, the cast. Allen and Johansson make a great odd couple, bantering all the way. The film is best when it becomes a buddy comedy and the two are together. Jackman, McShane, CHARLES DANCE and others round out an incredible cast. They aren't playing the most memorable characters ever - but we enjoy their company.

And the laugh rate is pretty good. Sure, it doesn't hold a candle to the films

that it was inspired by like THE THIN MAN. But there's plenty of quotable Woody Allen lines here. And it's nice to see Allen on screen, being silly, one of the last times he would do so for almost ten years.

And London looks great. And it's a small, escapist adventure. Where everyone is gorgeous and always say the right things and there isn't a hair out of place. Even the murders are bloodless and hookers live in South Kensington next to the Royal Albert Hall.

I don't think this is Allen's worst film, but it's certainly lower half or lower quarter even. There's nothing outwardly bad about it. It feels slight and rushed. This is Allen knocking out a simple tune. Silly and light, and a bit of fun. And not much more.

SONDRA: The point is I didn't get the story! I mean, if I'd used my feminine wiles like Katharine Hepburn or Rosalind Russell.

VIVIAN: Oh, come on.

Fun Facts

Some fun facts about SCOOP.

There's definitely deleted scenes here, especially scenes with the other recently dead that are on the boat to the afterlife. Amongst the people there is the wonderful TOBY JONES who gets no lines and is uncredited. There was a scene cut where a husband says he was part of a suicide pact with his wife but she backed out. Maybe that was Jones as it seems unlikely you'd have such a great actor as an extra.

The other Peter Lyman, the person that Sid and Sondra follows but turns out not to be Peter Lyman, is played by MATT DAY. MATT DAY, like Jackman, is Australian. He doesn't get any lines, so casting another Australian is only an in-joke for people who know both actors. There's a much deeper in-joke with his character as well. Someone had told Allen during the production of MATCH POINT that he should rename a major character, because there are no British people named Jerry. Allen thought that was strange, so he named this MATT DAY character Jerry, just to make a point I guess.

MAN: Jerry! It's Jerry Burke, Louis' chiropractor.

As mentioned, one of the inspirations for the film is ALL THE PRESIDENTS MEN, the 1976 film about the investigation of the Watergate scandal. Allen

actually makes quite a fun in-joke about ALL THE PRESIDENTS MEN. At one point Sid tells a person that he is the short one from that film, who is of course DUSTIN HOFFMAN, someone who Allen sometimes gets mistaken for. Another in-joke, just for the audience. It's that kind of film.

SID: I'm a reporter. And I'm doing a story About Elizabeth Gibson. If there's any comments, anything you know about her that I...

JAN: What paper? What paper are you from?

SID: The Washington Post. I'm one of the top reporters. Did you see All the President's Men? I was the short guy.

Outro

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Woody Allen Pages podcast.
Next week. Annie Hall. We look at Annie Hall.

SONDRA: You are a cynical crapehanger who always sees the glass half-empty!

SID: No, you're wrong. I see the glass half-full, but of poison.