

# Repackaged

By [Timothy Larsen](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

If you've never seen a film written and directed by Woody Allen, then you've missed about one a year for a biblical generation. Those who have seen them all are like the old-timers in the congregation of a long-serving minister: they know that Allen is apt to repeat his standard themes, retell his favorite jokes and rely on a well-worn bag of tricks.

A running gag throughout *Scoop* is that Allen's character, Sid, a mediocre stage magician, uses the same routine for every performance, right down to the banter with the helper from the audience. As with congregants, some people find this trait endearing and perhaps even cumulatively powerful. But only some.

Unlike Sid, Allen has worked harder of late to repackage his material. Breaking longstanding habits of filming in New York and scoring with jazz, his last two films have been set in London and used other musical styles. *Match Point* (2005) used opera for the sound track. *Scoop* inexplicably has more than its share of ballet music.

Scarlett Johansson plays Sondra, an unpromising reporter for her college newspaper who gets leads for a big story from a recently deceased journalist named Joe Strombel (Ian McShane). Sid becomes Sondra's sidekick in the investigation. The spectral newspaperman has a hunch that the "Tarot Card" serial killer is Peter Lyman (Hugh Jackman), son of Lord Lyman, a member of the British establishment.

Sondra starts to fall for Peter's aristocratic charm, and for much of the film viewers are made to wonder whether Joe's theories are hampering a sweet love match or Peter's likability is a veneer for something truly sinister.

Allen's followers will not be surprised that he gets in a couple of quips referring to his Jewish identity. Sid claims that he was born into "the Hebrew persuasion," but when he got older he "converted to narcissism." When asked if he is musical, he replies that he plays what used to be called the Jew's harp, but he no longer uses that term because you know how those people are: "the slightest hint of anti-

Semitism and they write letters.” (A tangentially related point: for some reason Allen’s characters habitually use *Jesus* and *Christ* as expletives.)

Allen’s trademark pessimism also gets a couple of new turns. Sid reassures Sondra that not everything in this world is sinister—“just practically everything.” Later, he denies that he sees the glass of life as half empty. It is half full—“but of poison.”

It is an enjoyable film, even for those without the larger frame of Woody-watching. The comedy is funny, the acting is good, the suspense is real, and the plot is unpredictable. In short, it entertains.

*Scoop* belongs to a film genre that does not really exist anymore. Allen has repeatedly paid homage to the popular culture of his youth. For example, *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) was in the style of a Hollywood musical, with dance numbers and songs by Cole Porter. *Scoop*, which closely resembles Allen’s *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), pays homage to the comic detection thriller. Though it’s set in the present, with characters engaging in casual sex and Google searches, its mix of comedy, suspense and mystery recalls classics such as the *Thin Man* movies.

Part of what came with those films were set pieces of the popular imagination, which delighted audiences with predictable stereotypes that verged on knowing parodies. So in *Scoop* Allen gives us an England of old country estates and stuffy London clubs. When Peter gives Sid a tour of the family seat, the magician remarks that it reminds him of Trollope—no, not the Victorian novelist, but a girl he once knew.

Likewise, viewers must accept that a mysterious figure is killing London prostitutes and leaving a Tarot card on the scene for no apparent reason other than that it offers the ambiance of a Charlie Chan movie. For some of us, the golden age when our favorite films were churned out at the rate of one a year is not over yet.