

ENTERTAINMENT

Movie Review

Neither Pacino Nor His Audience Well-Served by 'Simone'

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In the past, there have been two basic kinds of Al Pacino performances. The Actor Turns ("Godfather" and "Godfather II," "Serpico," "Donnie Brasco"), and the Hambone Spectacles ("Scarface," "Dick Tracy," "Scent of a Woman," to name but a few). Each sort has its adherents, but both could be counted upon to deliver the goods, entertainment-wise.

With the arrival of writer/director Andrew Niccol's alleged new comedy "Simone" there are now three categories of Pacino performances: Actor, Hambone, and Al, what were you thinking?!

Even 1985's "Revolution" wasn't this bad a misfire.

"Simone" starts out as a Hollywood movie about what venal creeps movie stars are, then gets nasty from there.

Pacino plays Viktor Taransky, a director in the John Cassavetes/Alan Rudolph-mode — auteur of the kind of tedious, self-absorbed artfilm that critics swoon over and audiences avoid like the plague.

This movie certainly doesn't fall into the "art-house" trap; no surprise there, since all the footage glimpsed of any of Taransky's films — with titles like "Sunrise, Sunset" and "Eternity Forever" — is howlingly pretentious, like a per-

fume commercial played out on the big screen.

It seems this movie not only lives to sneer at actors, but well-meaning art-film-makers, too. With only two writing credits under his belt ("Gattica" and "The Truman Show"), first-time director Niccol still summons venom to spare for the industry that's making his car payments.

In the hands of more adroit filmmakers, this poking-fun-at-yourself conceit can work — for instance Billy Wilder with "Sunset Boulevard," and even Mel Brooks with "Silent Movie."

Here, Niccol's contempt for the form just lays there, deader in the water than William Holden at the beginning of Wilder's immortal "Sunset Boulevard."

Even Pacino can't generate a spark of interest in the proceedings.

The movie opens with Pacino's director character, Taransky, on a studio backlot, carefully removing cherry Mike & Ikes from a candy bowl for his prima donna star, played quite credibly by Winona Ryder.

All the carefully segregated candy in the world, though, can't keep Ryder from storming off his set in a movie-star huff, which results in his ex-wife studio head (Catherine Keener) firing him on the spot.

Desperate to salvage his opus, Taransky is caught snitching his footage by a crazed

computer geek (is there any other kind in the movies?) with an inoperable eye tumor, and a dream.

Before long, Taransky is in possession of the recently-deceased geek's "computer code" that allows him to artificially generate his dream thespian: the eponymous Simone (newcomer Rachel Roberts), a beautiful, thoroughly empty young woman who mouths his words unerringly.

He's hit rock bottom, but the movie still has a ways to go.

Taransky proceeds to pimp out Simone like a blonde-haired, blue-eyed J-Lo, saturating all forms of media with his pixilated protégé.

Next thing you know, Simone is winning Oscars, doing magazine covers and cutting best-selling records — all of it orchestrated in secret by a suddenly very tech-savvy Taransky, with software that seems to miraculously keep improving and updating itself.

Wackiness, as you might expect, ensues.

Which is not to say there's nothing good about this film.

The actress playing Taransky's daughter — the film's sole voice of reason — Evan Rachel Wood, from TV's "Once and Again," is a delight. Apparently 14 or so going on infinity, whenever she's on screen, the movie is lifted to a higher level.

And Pacino is allocated several long-

winded monologues — possibly what drew him to the material in the first place.

Perhaps lines like, "The only real truth is the work," and, "Our ability to manufacture fraud has exceeded our ability to detect it," looked better on paper than they come off here, in the hands of first-timer Niccol.

Perhaps it's the filmmaker's personal credo being stated when Taransky avers, "I relate better to people when they're not actually there."

Come on — this is sitcom-level claptrap, not Pacino-worthy oratory!

I hope this isn't the first step in the Robert Deniro-ization of Al Pacino, where a once-great artist is reduced to the status of hard-working hack for hire.

The real problem with this movie — beyond the weak script (by about the half-way point, the movie's inner logic has so completely collapsed, you expect to find out at the end it's all been a dream) and the stagey direction, is its virtually tangible sense of self-loathing.

What does this movie like about Hollywood? Nothing, apparently.

While being chock-full of heartfelt, acerbic one-liners at the expense of the industry that bankrolled it, the film doesn't validate its cynicism with any new insights.

Pacino deserves better, and so do his fans. Al, what were you thinking?