

The idea was a natural. Find three prestigious American directors whose films have frequently revolved around the Big Apple. Let them flex their creative muscles with a rare opportunity to make a short film about 40 minutes in length. Package the three dazzling little suckers together and watch the rave reviews and money pour in. It didn't work.

While *New York Stories* will certainly go down as one of the big disappointments of the year, it's tempting to suggest that you go see it anyway. Short subjects are almost never attempted and Martin Scorsese, Francis Coppola and Woody Allen are three of our finest directors.

But frankly, this movie doesn't deserve such largesse. One might have expected some odd, quirky even unsuccessful efforts. But what we get is boredom.

Scorsese opens the film with "Life Lessons," easily the best of the lot. It features Nick Nolte and Rosanna Arquette in the familiar story of a celebrated artist who feeds off the misery of his unsuccessful relationship to create great art.

While the plot is nothing new, Nolte brings conviction to the many scenes where he must stare at blank canvas with a thoughtful air. And nobody whines better than Arquette. There is genuine chemistry between them, as well as a hilarious "performance art" sequence featuring a rival for Arquette's affections.

Compared to the other shorts, "Life Lessons" is a delight. Coppola's entry, "Life Without Zoe," is an unmitigated mess. From the credits, it appears the entire Coppola clan was involved with this uninteresting story about a poor little rich girl who lives alone in a sumptuous New York hotel while her flutist father jet-sets

around the world giving concerts and raking in buckets of money.

A fluffy piece of nothing, "Life Without Zoe" might have maintained a certain bitchy, nouveau riche air, but the plot meanders through a hotel robbery, a rich Arab boy looking for friends and a reconciliation between the little girl's parents — all to no effect.

The only interesting character is a doorman played by Paul Herman. He talks like Father Guido Sarducci from *Saturday Night Live* and outs a little fun into the life of Zoe, not to mention the movie.

That actor also appears in Woody Allen's short film, "Oedipus Wrecks," which is a wonderful title for a fitfully amusing take-off on the standard kvetching, Jewish mother we've seen so many times before.

Essentially, "Oedipus Wrecks" is a one-joke story, which is just fine for a short film. Unfortunately, that joke — the nagging mother carried to surreal extremes — is carried on far too long and never delivers the comedic punch we expect.

"Life Lessons" is respectable, but it can't make up for the last 90 minutes of the movie. The real New York City is far more exciting and interesting than any of the stories told here.

By Michael Giltz