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Cannes 2011: Woody Loves Paris; *Sleeping Beauty* Gets Dark

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Critics were in a forgiving mood on the first day of the Cannes Film Festival. They treated Woody Allen's latest trifle with a generous spirit ("I enjoyed it!" some said, a tad defensively), though none would claim it ranks with his great works, just insisting that *Midnight In Paris* was pleasant enough. And the emotionally inert feature debut *Sleeping Beauty* by director Julia Leigh prompted discussions of the director's obvious intelligence and potential to deliver down the road, rather than catcalls for its opaque storytelling and purposeless affect. Maybe it's another sign of our permanent recession: critics can't afford to toss out brickbats left and right. They're going to save them for the movies that really deserve it.

MIDNIGHT IN PARIS ** out of ****

Woody Allen's latest bauble is neither a hit a la *Match Point* nor a miss like *Whatever Works* or *Cassandra's Dream* or *Scoop*. It's just... another Woody Allen movie. If you're a fan, it will prove diverting. If you're not a fan, it certainly won't convert you. Owen Wilson proves an affable lead and slips easily into the familiar Woody role of a wildly successful and wealthy person who is also dissatisfied with

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their lot. In Wilson's case, he's an in-demand Hollywood screenwriter who really wants to be a serious novelist. His girlfriend/fiance is Rachel McAdams, a pill of a person who derides every single aspect of Wilson's personality and likes. He enjoys wandering the streets of Paris in the rain; she can't wait to get home. It doesn't help that they're on vacation with her Tea Party parents who can't stand Wilson and even have him spied on in hopes of discouraging their romance. McAdams meanwhile is clearly more attracted to a pompous old flame played amusingly by Michael Sheen.

So they're clearly not made for each other and it's merely a question of which Parisian woman will catch Wilson's eye and show him the love and respect and zest for real life he desires. Will it be the tour guide, played nicely in by Carla Bruni, the wife of French President Nicolas Sarkozy? Or the young girl who runs a very casual knick knock stand of antiques and old Cole Porter 78s?

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Perhaps the one person you wouldn't suspect is Zelda Fitzgerald. In a whimsical and never particularly convincing manner, Wilson is whisked back to the 1920s Paris of his dreams and is soon rubbing shoulders with Zelda and F. Scott, not to mention Ernest Hemingway, Salvador Dali, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso... and Marion Cotillard as the beguiling muse for so many of these artists. Hmm. The obvious comparison is the fantastical romantic comedy *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, but if you haven't seen that gem starring Jeff Daniels by all means stop everything and do so right away.

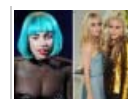
You can map out the rest of this film quite easily, though you may not expect Allen to repeat ad nauseam the very simple idea that people are nostalgic for the past but life can be hard no matter when you're alive. (We got it the first three times.) Virtually all the historic figures come across as no deeper than a Saturday Night Live sketch approximation of them. The jokes rarely extend beyond Wilson wanting to pick up some paintings by these masters for mere pennies or giving Bunuel an idea for his most famous film. The lone exception is Kathy Bates as Gertrude Stein; she somehow manages to create an honest to goodness flesh and blood character you actually believe exists.

Everything else is a piffle, though it's always pleasant to stroll the streets of Paris and listen to Sidney Bichet. There are worse ways of spending 90 minutes though none but the diehards should bother.

SLEEPING BEAUTY * 1/2 out of **** (but *** out of **** for potential talent)

Australian novelist Julia Leigh shows intelligence and a genuine command of cinema with her theatrical debut. Unfortunately, it's also a classic festival film -- the sort of opaque movie-making that a general audience will never sit still for. You spend half the movie figuring out who is who and how they're related to each other and what exactly is going on and the second half wondering if you should care. It reminded me of Paolo Sorrentino's *The Consequences Of Love*. It too left me cold emotionally, but I admired the artistry behind it and hoped for better things from him down the road. The same is true for Leigh, who could also be facilely compared to Andrea Arnold. (In a nice sign, four female directors are In Competition this year, perhaps a record.)

Our heroine -- played with subtlety by Emily Browning -- is an odd duck. She seems to be a college student and we first spot her on campus taking part in an experiment, presumably for modest amounts of money. It involves sliding a tube down her throat and into her lungs, showing in one easy image how her body can be invaded, how she can use it to make cash and how it feels outside of her, distant and something to be used. The rest of the film proves this masterful, unnerving scene wasn't a fluke, but the promise of it is never fulfilled.



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Zach Galifianakis Slams Sean Penn, Ke\$ha, Little

Slowly we learn more about this woman. She has a string of jobs like waitress and running a copier in an office. (And apparently hasn't learned how to make copies and sort them at the same time since she repeatedly does it by hand.) She also seems to be a prostitute or perhaps just enjoys exceptionally blunt businessmen in high-priced bars. (We never quite see money exchange hands in these scenes.)

So it's no surprise when Browning's character responds to an ad and stumbles into very kinky territory indeed. In the sort of goofily debauched scene only the movies can imagine (think Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*), she wears lingerie to pour drinks while mostly nude women serve dinner to a group of very elderly, very wealthy people. Even more ludicrous are the two completely nude women contorting themselves on the floor like the naughtiest coffee tables in history. There's more -- including a relatively positive relationship with an ailing male friend and perhaps former almost-lover (the road not taken?) who is riddled with cancer (it seems) and drinks like a fish.

This is topped by her final debasement or exploration of how objectified she can make her own body. Our heroine becomes a sleeping beauty, that is, very well paid to consume a substance a la Rohipnol that will completely knock her out and allows extremely wealthy men to observe and lay with her in a manner that would please the Marquis de Sade but which does not include penetration. That would presumably be far too banal for these epicures of ecstasy.

Leigh throughout gets excellent support from her actors and her technical crew. The movie looks marvelous and is clearly driven by a probing intelligence. A few bold touches don't pay off. Most of the film has no score so when it suddenly appears in a driving scene, you perk up immediately. True, she is on her way to play a sleeping beauty, but the emotional payoff of finally hearing a swelling, ominous score doesn't follow through with any sense of discovery. Similarly, one of the debauched elderly men is suddenly speaking directly into the camera while repeating a long anecdote about turning 30 and receiving a book he found very meaningful. Again, the technical aspect is striking but the monologue is so meandering and unsatisfying that it leads you nowhere. Other characters come and go; we don't even really learn their names much less care about their attitudes towards themselves or our heroine. She finally has a truly cathartic show of emotion at the finale but why exactly and what is she feeling and is this what it takes for her to scratch the surface of her heart?

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