

Old Hollywood Glamour in Woody Allen's 'Café Society'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In the 1930s, the contrast between the world of Hollywood movie sparkle and the rest of a Depression-era America was as different as peasants and kings. Writer/director Woody Allen captures this dichotomy with an East Coast/West Coast tale of one family in “Café Society.”

Since this is a Woody Allen film, there is a also some star-crossed lovers involved, when a woman gets between a nephew and his uncle. This intrigue drives the story, and Allen puts some family conflict in the midst, as the Jewish kin that are featured illustrates how different life was in that era of America. Throw in a little tribute to the film “Casablanca,” and “Café Society” has a vibe of glamour and fascination, with the usual jokey observations that Woody likes to sprinkle throughout his stories.

Phil Stern (Steve Carrell) is a high powered agent in mid-1930s Hollywood. He receives a call from his sister in New York City, that his nephew Bobby (Jesse Eisenberg) is coming to Los Angeles and could use some work. The family in New York feels that Phil has eschewed his East Coast roots, which includes his middle class Jewish family and mobster nephew Ben (Corey Stoll, also Bobby's brother). Bobby reluctantly accepts Los Angeles, but isn't that happy until he meets Vonnie (Kristen Stewart), another worker in Phil's agency.



Bobby (Jesse Eisenberg) Does His Best Bogart in 'Café Society'

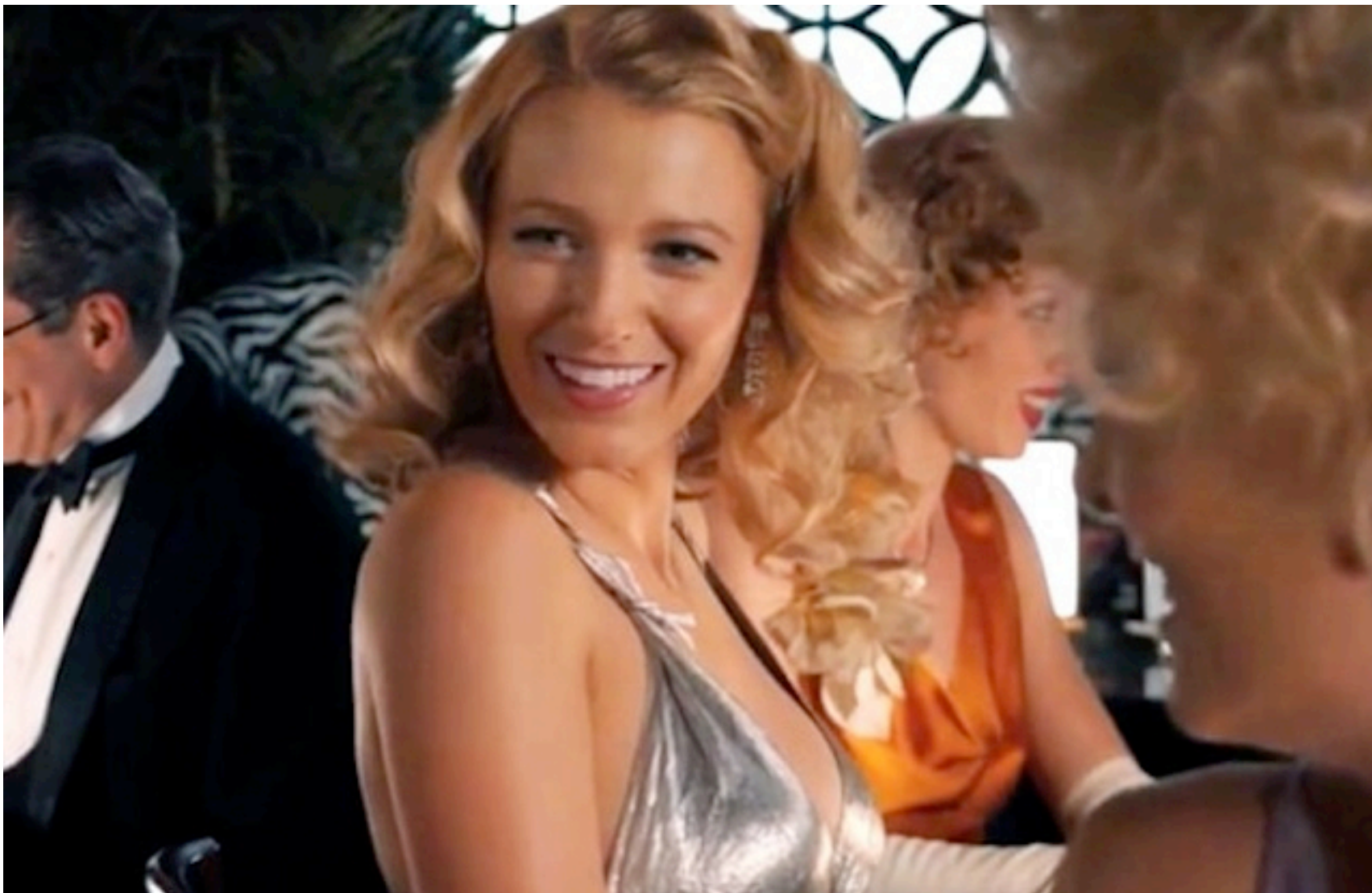
Photo credit: Amazon Studios

Bobby falls in love, but Vonnie can't reciprocate because she is beholden to another, which turns out to be an affair with Uncle Phil. Bobby leaves the situation behind, and escapes back to New York City, where his brother Ben has opened a nightclub and makes him manager, complete with Rick-from-Casablanca white dinner jacket. Bobby finds a new life, and a new marriage with Veronica (Blake Lively), but his past is about to catch up with him.

This is a beautiful postcard to an era of movie moguls and nightclub elegance. There is constant name dropping of the stars of the era – Spencer Tracy, Joan Crawford, Irene Dunne, Joel McCrea – and glimpses into the lives and lifestyles of the wealthy society of the time. And in true Allen fashion, despite the elegance, there is the underbelly of the mobster brother, who can't help but go too far, even when he helps his sister with an obnoxious neighbor.

Steve Carrell gives one of his best “serious” performances, and wears the guilt of his family roots versus his duplicitous life like a suit of armor. Jesse Eisenberg gives his usual steady portrayal, morphing from gee-whiz boy to sophisticated nightclub manager with evolving authenticity. His later scenes as the Bogart-esque host are the most remarkable – you believe that he could do that.

The supporting cast also adds some flair to the proceedings. Jeannie Berlin portrays Bobby and Ben's mother Rose, and her foghorn voice is memorably utilized. Corey Stoll – who is becoming an Allen ensemble player – gives Ben a bit of vulnerability, especially as he turns “Christian” in prison. Blake Lively is era-appropriate as the wife of Ben, a stunning would-be actress. Parker Posey portrays a society maven named Rad, who dryly takes Bobby under her wing in Los Angeles, because she is also a transplanted New Yorker.



Veronica (Blake Lively) Brings Back Hollywood Glam in 'Café Society'

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

The story gets a bit muddled once secrets are revealed, but it never is uninteresting, and features Woody's penchant for romanticism and broken hearts. Kristen Stewart is a little soft as the love interest, but has that faraway wistfulness that a young lost soul needs, in order to make her right and wrong decisions. In a sense, we're experiencing the memories of an 80 year old man with 50 years of show business stories. Within the metaphors of different time periods and circumstances, Woody Allen replays the hits and near misses of a life that always had something on the line.

And the best part of “Café Society” is the window into 1930s America, where a schlep of a boy can teach his disconnected uncle to be a mensch, and a popular nightclub can be the center of the action, one cocktail at a time.

“Café Society” continues its nationwide release in Chicago on July 22nd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Steve Carrell, Jesse Eisenberg, Kristen Stewart, Jeannie Berlin, Blake Lively, Corey Stoll and Parker Posey. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Rated “PG-13”



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