

# Robert De Niro, Director Barry Levinson Wade Through Hollywood's Mud in 'What Just Happened?'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In his long and distinguished career, Robert De Niro has probably seen it all when it comes to Hollywood excesses and quagmires. Given that experience, he seems the perfect choice to portray an aging film producer and power broker whose influence is on the decline.

"What Just Happened?" teams De Niro with veteran director Barry Levinson ("Rain Man," "Good Morning, Vietnam," "The Natural") in a provocative inside look at the current film business. De Niro is a producer named Ben whose latest film (starring Sean Penn) is in major trouble.



His director (Michael Wincott) refuses to cut a scene that makes preview audiences squeamish.

Meanwhile, Ben's other film (which is about to go into production) is also experiencing problems because star Bruce Willis (playing himself) is rejecting all the physical requirements necessary for the leading male role.

Ben is now a producer on the brink.

The drug-addled director requires constant reassurance, the studio executives are depending on his delivery of the latest Bruce Willis film and

his estranged wife wants him in therapy so they can learn to live apart.

As an answer to the question of the movie's title, it seems that everything can collapse to nothing in Tinseltown.

The film is based on a memoir by producer Art Linson (who also wrote the screenplay). Proving that truth is stranger than fiction, the farcical narrative delves into how egos essentially run Hollywood and how those egos are largely attached to dysfunctional human beings.

De Niro gives an organic and low-keyed performance. His Ben is a fighter who's used to the problems and childish attitudes in his chosen profession. He just never counted on everything happening at once. There's never the explosive De Niro we're often used to.



Robert De Niro in "What Just Happened?".

*Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures*

He's just a man who's calmly standing on the high ledge and wondering if he's about to jump or be pushed. The supporting cast is hilarious and clearly relishes getting back at the industry with direct stabs. John Turturro is exceptional as Dick Bell (an agent who has more obstacles than answers).

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Bruce Willis (playing a monstrous version of himself) shows off some great comic chops as he petulantly mouths off to every underling who dares to cross his "star".

Can Willis get nominated for an Oscar for portraying Willis?

The only weakness is the redundancy of the conflict. The film clocks in at about 30 minutes too long (it's 107 minutes in total) and has the same problems repeating themselves. "What Just Happened?" ends in a whimper – as real life tends to do – rather than a bang.

But for those who think Hollywood is a crumbling Babylon or (on the other side of the coin) a collaboration of "creative" souls, "What Just Happened?" is the ticket to the "show" of the business. Just add the six-buck tub of popcorn.

*"What Just Happened?," which is directed by Barry Levinson and features Robert De Niro, Stanley Tucci, John Turturro, Catherine Keener, Sean Penn, Robin Wright Penn, Michael Wincott and Bruce Willis, opened on Oct. 17, 2008.*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [19]  
Staff Writer  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [18]

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