

Few surprises in *What Just Happened*

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Barry Levinson, screenplay by Art Linson, based on his book



What Just Happened

Hollywood producers live in mortal fear of being ostracized and relegated to the "black hole of Hollywood purgatory." This is the theme of veteran director Barry Levinson's new movie *What Just Happened*. The filmmaker teamed up with long-time producer Art Linson (*Fight Club*, *Into the Wild*), who wrote the screenplay based on his memoirs, *Bitter Hollywood Tales from the Front Line*.

The movie is an insider's look at a machine that all too often squanders vast sums of money on inartistic and trivial projects. But the film's heart really beats for industry stalwarts who feel their careers are jeopardized in a town where "new is best." An underlying self-pity makes for a rambling quasi-comedy that falls flat. The movie ends up being more resentful about the fate of producers than critical of what they produce. By contrast, Levinson's *Wag the Dog* (1997), in which a political spin doctor uses Hollywood to concoct the rationale for war, is a more thorough-going satire.

In *What Just Happened*, Robert De Niro is cast as Ben, recently named a top movie producer by *Vanity Fair* magazine—a designation he is scrambling to protect. His new movie "Fiercely," starring Sean Penn, is an ultra-violent film in which an animal is shot dead during the film's finale. While killing people is not a problem for the studio chief, Lou (Catherine Keener),

doing away with pet dogs is considered to be box office poison. She demands a change before the movie goes to the Cannes festival.

With Ben's "power credentials" on the line, failure is not an option. In addition, his wallet is being drained by tens of thousands of dollars a month in alimony and child support. To satisfy Lou, Ben must coddle a pretentious, unstable British director (Michael Wincott), who has trouble eviscerating his film in line with the financial needs of the studio. ("I made a film that doesn't wallow in the clichés of retribution.")

Another of Ben's projects is threatened by its "mercurial" star (Bruce Willis) who refuses to shave his beard. ("We got the studio to pay him \$20 million dollars to be a leading man. For that kind of money there's an expectation.") The actor's stressed-out agent (John Turturro) is on his way to a melt-down, and may end up like another "ten-percenter" who has recently commit suicide. ("Agents usually kill other agents not themselves.")

Ben's private life is also a mess. He wants to reconcile with his second wife Kelly (Robin Wright Penn), who, although ambivalent about the prospect of reuniting with her ex, is having an affair with married screenwriter Scott (Stanley Tucci). Scott in turn wants Ben to produce his script about a florist, ("Florists are at the center of power and deceit"). Back-stabbing and betrayal are integral components of the movie-making business.

An oversized movie poster in the studio conference room sums things up for Ben—and many others in the industry. It displays the picture of a giant reptilian eyeball above the words: "Domestic gross \$410,000,000" There is neither title nor credits. "See that?" says Ben. "No director. No producer. Just a number. A big number."

What Just Happened stumbles in its queasiness about taking on this reality. De Niro's Ben turns out to be the

only recognizable human being in a greedy and narcissistic world. That Ben is plagued by a sense of impending banishment is legitimate. But why are his greed and narcissism, as opposed to that of his beleaguered colleagues, so sympathetically handled? It's a double standard that strains the film's credibility—and weakens its humor.

While Levinson and Linson know where the bodies are buried, they don't tell, which makes for a tame film. In an interview at the beginning of his book, Linson claims he was naïve to the point of 'masochistic self-destruction' upon learning that Hollywood businessmen don't take kindly to being lampooned. "I don't think I was that vicious towards people," he says about his book. The movie suffers from this backing down.

The Levinson film mourns the Hollywood of by-gone days, but hesitates in tackling today's circumstances. Writes Linson: "The business has changed. When I started, studios never lost money, so you could make movies like *Car Wash* or *Melvin and Howard* or *This Boy's Life*.

"Today ... [t]he studios are part of multi-tiered, multinational integrated corporations ... These big distribution companies just want to make sequels, and they've sort of opted out of the other business. That's what changed. But that's created an opportunity for these smart business guys who have made their money elsewhere and have suddenly seen an opening in Hollywood that they haven't seen in the last ten years."

Rather than a portrayal of ruthless financiers, *What Just Happened* offers up an unlikely representation in the form of two Middle Eastern buffoons, one of which made his fortune cleaning wardrobes for the movie studios. ("He charged them ten dollars a suit. They pay. Next time he charged them fifty dollar a suit. They pay. Next tie he charged them hundred dollar a suit. They pay. He says, 'I want to be in the movie business, I understand these people.'") The characterization borders on an unpleasant caricature.

The film's strongest feature is its commitment to dramatizing Ben's precarious existence—a man always on the run (literally) and one step from ruin. But producers are not the only ones who live with chronic insecurity. Among writers, actors and directors only a relative few get considered for the studios' elusive A-lists. In *What Just Happened* everyone's but Ben's

suffering is the occasion for a joke.

Another problem is that all scenes in the movie revolve around Ben and every interaction is subordinate to his concerns. This tends to suffocate other promising possibilities. The funeral of the agent is case in point. While the Willis character addresses the crowd ("I see so many people out there that I would rather be eulogizing today than Jack."), an opportunity to say something about the seedy side of Hollywood wheeling-and-dealing is missed. What's going on in the background of the scene, with the various industry types consorting, could potentially be more interesting than the limp, unconvincing confrontation between Ben and his daughter.

What Just Happened is artistically disjointed and lacking in courage. Apparently the stellar cast wanted to make a hard-hitting piece—the various performers worked for scale.

The past 12 months have witnessed the widespread discontent of writers and actors with the studio behemoths. It's unfortunate the film did not tap more deeply into this sentiment.

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