



ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Woody Allen's latest crime caper, "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion," stars Allen as crackerjack insurance investigator CW Briggs. Briggs might be forced to relinquish bragging rights to being the best in the business when he falls under the spell of a crook—and a beautiful colleague—in his most baffling case to date, and finds that he is the one left clueless.

In "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion," Woody Allen returns to the period of the 1940s to entrance audiences with an idea he had been musing about for a while—the hypnosis craze that seemed to mesmerize many of the Jazz Era, and is still captivating people today.

"Woody always says he has more ideas than he has time to make them," says producer Letty Aronson. "Like several of his films, 'The Curse of the Jade Scorpion' is a period movie, but like a lot of his movies set in the '30s and '40s, its themes are very current, which is why they play to contemporary audiences."

"This was an idea I had wanted to do for quite a while," the writer/director offers. "I've never been hypnotized, and there was no specific reason to do it; it was just a funny premise, and the rest is whatever spun out from that."

What spun out was an amusing take on denied desires both romantic and illegal. Is it really true that no power of suggestion can make us do anything we don't *really* want to do...especially when it comes to love?

That clearly surfaces in how the woman's role plays out in the man's world of the '40s setting. While his characters play to the archetype on the surface, Allen flips it as the key players let their outer masks slip, exposing their true selves.

"Certainly Elizabeth Berkeley's character, Jill, is a classic type of the 1940s," says Allen. "She plays the sexy secretary, a real staple of films of that era. By all appearances, Helen Hunt's Betty Ann Fitzgerald is the stronger woman."

But only at first blush, as Helen Hunt notes. “As a woman in the workplace, she couldn’t be more powerful for her time, which is something you didn’t see a lot of back then.”

Despite her outwardly steely office demeanor, “Fitz,” as she is often called, is involved in a clandestine affair with her boss, Mr. Magruder, a risky romance then, as well as now. This duality was one of the things Hunt liked best about her character. “Her love for him is her biggest weakness,” Hunt remarks. “Fitz just has this big blind spot when it comes to men and love, like a lot of women do. Where she is able to stand up to men in the office, she isn’t able to stand up to them in her personal life. That’s what’s so great about playing this character—for all of her strength and sexuality, she’s the girl who’s really a mess, the girl who literally winds up on a ledge. She is not as controlled as she tries to appear.”

On the flip side: Jill.

“She’s the office girl that all the men want, but she’s the one who always goes home at night alone,” says Elizabeth Berkeley, who plays the role of the proverbial “pinch and tickle girl.” “She loves all the flirtation and the forbidden passion going on in the office.”

Nevertheless, it is Jill who knows how to hold her cards close, realizing the power of her attractiveness and how to wield it with a sense of control, whereas Fitz cannot. Berkley notes, “You see it in the scene where Jill has dinner with Briggs and some of the other executives. While she flirts with CW, teasing him coyly, she never caves to the office romance. Again, Jill goes home alone; she knows where to draw the line.”

There comes a third woman in CW Briggs’ life, Charlize Theron’s Laura Kensington, the stunningly beautiful, spoiled little rich girl, who is used to getting any man she wants. She takes Briggs as an easy mark for her seductive wiles, but his mysterious rebuff proves the ultimate attraction for the blonde temptress.

“This is my second film with Woody after ‘Celebrity,’ and I would work with him again and again,” Theron says. “What he does with the writing, the dialogue, is different from anybody else...at least for me. It may be period, but the characters have a modern feel. Also he writes me these great, fabulous, flamboyant parts, like

Laura Kensington. I loved this character...and I especially loved her clothes, but," she adds with a teasing pout, "I didn't get to keep them."

Theron recalls that when Woody first spoke to her about playing Laura, he made the role sound almost irresistible for any actress. "The first time I talked to him about doing the part, he said, 'If I were making this film in the '40s I would cast Lauren Bacall. Would you be interested?' Okay, so Woody Allen *and* Lauren Bacall—how difficult a decision is that? Who wouldn't jump at the chance to be Lauren Bacall?"

Aronson reveals that one of Allen's great strengths is knowing which actors are perfect for the roles. "He just has this instinct for knowing who is right," she says. "He's not a director who works by committee, but is guided solely by his own vision; he knows exactly what he is looking for."

Working with Woody Allen for the first time, that approach suited Helen Hunt perfectly. "You know, all that any actor really wants is to work with a director who really knows what they want and is truly passionate about it," she says, adding that she got an equal charge acting opposite the comedy legend. "I've done a lot of comedy, but it was almost impossible to keep from laughing watching Woody as Briggs play off of my character."

In preparing for their roles, Helen Hunt and Elizabeth Berkley watched such '40s classics as "Double Indemnity" and "His Girl Friday," which served as valuable resources for the tone and style of the era. Berkley relates that she tried to bring some of that style into her audition, but nature had other plans. "I had my hair done like Veronica Lake for the audition, but as I was walking over, the skies just opened up. By the time I got there, I looked more like I had fallen in Lake Veronica than I did Veronica Lake."

Despite that nearly disastrous audition, Allen knew he wanted Berkley for the role of Jill, saying "I have always loved Elizabeth and wanted to work with her, because she has a really great sense of timing, and I knew she could be very funny."

The director offered equal praise for his other female stars. "Helen is such an amazing actress; she really made the character so much more than it was written. And what can I say about Charlize? She's funny, sexy, smart and was just born to play a '40s femme fatale," he says.

The men in the main cast are mostly alumni from previous Woody Allen movies, with one notable exception: Dan Aykroyd, who stars as Betty Ann Fitzgerald's boss and illicit paramour. Though their paths had crossed on a number of occasions over the years, Allen and Aykroyd had never had an opportunity to collaborate, though, they are both quick to note, it was not for lack of interest.

"I have been a huge fan of his since his 'Saturday Night Live' days, but I just never had the right part until now," Allen says.

Aykroyd indicates that the part was worth the wait, remarking, "I love that I got to play a heel in the classic '40s sense. I think Magruder loves Betty Ann, but he is just too weak. When she starts wanting more, it's easier to dump her than to deal with the scandal." As for working with Allen for the first time, the actor simply asks, "What artist in this industry has not wanted to work with Woody?"

The question is rhetorical to the three actors who had worked with Allen in the past and were only too happy to again: Brian Markinson, Wallace Shawn and David Ogden Stiers. "The Curse of the Jade Scorpion" marks Stiers' fifth collaboration with Allen, though, the actor quips, "I have no idea why he keeps calling me."

In this case, the reason is a no-brainer. Stiers, with his familiar deep and commanding voice, was the perfect choice to play the role of Voltan, the hypnotist at the center of the crime caper. While he is also a veteran of a number of animated hits, it was one of the rare times that Stiers' voice played such a pivotal role in a live action film, though the actor recalls that Allen didn't give him much to go on when they first talked about the part.

"When I got the call from Woody, all he tells me about the character is this: 'He's a guy named Voltan. He wears a turban. He doesn't have an accent.'

"I say: 'You gotta guy with a Middle European name and no accent?'

"He says: 'Oh, this Voltan is from Brooklyn.'

"How do you turn that down?"

Rather, Stiers turned to the Amazing Randy in Florida and Mark Sweet at the Magic Castle in Los Angeles for a little hypnotic inspiration. He jokes that he also found motivation, appropriately enough, in the stars. "I'm a double Scorpio and you've got that Jade Scorpion thing going on..."

Behind the camera, “The Curse of the Jade Scorpion” brings together a number of veterans from earlier Woody Allen movies, including cinematographer Zhao Fei, production designer Santo Loquasto, editor Alisa Lepselter and costume designer Suzanne McCabe. Loquasto, especially, was no stranger to the story’s period backdrop, having revisited the first half of the 20th century with Allen on such films as “Bullets Over Broadway” and “Radio Days.”

Allen offers, “I tend to like certain periods. The `20s, `30s and `40s were a very exciting time in New York. They were the decades of gangsters and gamblers—the music was great, the clothes were great... It’s just a period that appeals to me.”

One element from the past that resonates through all of Allen’s films—period or not—is music. It typically is from the Jazz Era. “He just loves the music,” says Allen’s longtime collaborator Santo Loquasto. “It is his inspiration. When we’re discussing the look of any of his productions, our meetings are on top of his album collection. The breadth of his knowledge of music from that era is truly amazing.”

Another one of Allen’s proclivities that stayed true to form for “The Curse of the Jade Scorpion” shoot was its location: New York, New York. The insurance office where CW Briggs, Fitz and Magruder all work was located in a government building at 80 Center Street. Loquasto notes, “Woody likes that Depression-era look, which was perfect for 1940, so we kept the palette for the office in warm, earth tones. He wanted the office to have that ‘Front Page’ look.”

In designing Briggs’ and Fitzgerald’s apartments, Loquasto drew inspiration from the 1957 film “Designing Woman.” Briggs’ somewhat dumpy apartment, located on 85th Street, takes after that of Gregory Peck’s character in that film, while Fitz’s stylish pad, at Park Avenue and 35th, echoes Lauren Bacall’s glamorous apartment.

Built in the 1920s, the latter building presented a challenge to the production designer, as well as director of photography Zhao Fei. “The main problem we had was that her apartment was really too small and shaped like a pie, which made it really hard to light,” Loquasto notes. “But we managed to pull off a few tricks with the lighting to make it work.”

A New York warehouse was reconfigured to serve as Voltan’s elaborate Oriental private den. Loquasto also reveals that Laura Kensington’s posh bedroom

was located in the same mansion that was used as Helen Sinclair's home in "Bullets Over Broadway."

Costume designer Suzanne McCabe, who also worked on "Bullets Over Broadway," comments that the costumes for this film called for a far more understated style. "They weren't as outlandish as the mobster look in 'Bullets Over Broadway.'"

McCabe gave Helen Hunt's wardrobe a tailored professional look, though, she says, "Woody definitely wanted her also to appear soft and feminine, not all brass tacks." Contrastingly, the designer put Elizabeth Berkley in dresses that, while appropriate for the office, could be a distraction for the men for whom she worked. The men wore suits and hats custom-made in the fashion of the day.

"The clothes, like the music, are there to help support the story," Allen says. "Everything has to contribute to making the tale work—it's true of any film I do, and I'm sure most directors feel the same."