

Unfit for Wear

By Josef Woodard, July 6, 2006

The Devil Wears Prada

Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway star in a film written by Aline Brosh McKenna, based on the novel by Lauren Weisberger, and directed by David Frankel.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Here is a movie in which insider knowledge gets you a lot more comic bang for your buck — actually a rare occasion in the bland, homogenizing domain of American studio movies. If you're a fashionista, or someone with even a casual knowledge of who's who and what's what in fashion, certain lines of dialogue will have more weight, and the punch lines more gusto. The rest of us couture-challenged shlubs will side more with our hapless heroine, Andy (Anne Hathaway). An aspiring journalist in N.Y.C., she is hired as a go-fer assistant for the influential fashion magazine *Runway*, and she brings a dismissive skepticism about the seemingly indulgent and narcissistic world of high fashion.

The sartorial plebeians among us are almost seduced into loving — or at least into being intrigued — by this alternate universe. Unfortunately, the film has neither the artistic chops nor true commitment to make it more than a breezy diversion, ennobled by one stellar feature: a stunning, cool, and utterly magnetic performance by Meryl Streep as the delightfully wicked “dragon lady” editor of *Runway*.

Taking note of the fragile intersection of insiders versus outsiders is at the core of the novel and now the screen adaptation, but *Devil* keeps tripping on its ill-fitting heels. A wildly hit-and-miss affair, it is more maudlin and Hollywood-glossy than Robert Altman's juicy *Prêt-à-Porter*, which celebrated and satirized the mad polyrhythmic pageantry of the Paris fashion show. *Devil* is too tame and generic to have much bite, with lame emo songs taking the wind out of many scenes, and cardboard characters we care squat about.

The only reason to see the film is Streep. The film's strongest scene comes early in the film, with a disarming casualness amplified by Streep's scarily cool sadism. Andy has let out a snicker in her boss's office while new accessories are being sized up by the queen, and Streep smoothly unleashes a breathtaking speech about the trickle-down effect of the seemingly trivial and arcane machinations of high fashion through to the mass level, down to the bargain bin where Andy no doubt picked up her lumpy cerulean sweater.

More of that kind of probing, culturally charged material could have made *The Devil Wears Prada* a film that enlightens, instead of one that mildly amuses between fistfuls of popcorn.