

# PLAY IT AGAIN WOODY

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'If you want to tell people the truth', said George Bernard Shaw, 'you'd better make them laugh - or they'll kill you'. Paradoxically, in a conservative system, the most subversive radical film is one which seems to deal with its subject in a humorous manner. Ironic films may escape the marginality of the art cinema, but do they retain their critical edge?

The work of Woody Allen is seen by some as artful while, by others, as artless. Possibly what is significant about the public and critical love-hate fixation with Woody Allen is that it shows the audience rather than the little guy on the screen as indecisive and neurotic. Although his latest film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, is expected to receive several Oscars at the next Academy Awards ceremony, Woody Allen will not be there: more likely, he will be playing clarinet in a Manhattan jazz club, calling his own tune as ever.

Allen Stewart Konigsberg was born in New York in 1935, with a Jewish family and a tradition to live up to. Small, red-haired, short-sighted, shy - the child Allen Konigsberg is a constant source for the adult Woody Allen's ironic memories. Dropping out of university, Woody wrote for television comedians before becoming a stand-up comic himself. Since 1966, he has made or starred in approximately one film per year, progressing from early slapstick to a darker side of humour. He always sees comedy as a serious matter; it is also probable that serious drama, for him, can be curiously comic.

His work has developed from simple parody and satire (*Bananas*, *Play It Again Sam*) into more subtle and original uses of his distorted vision (such as *Zelig*). In the early 70s he moved from the neurotic humour of *Bananas* to a more sustained parody of science-fiction in *Sleeper*, and from there to a tongue-in-cheek mockery of sombre Russian drama and dogma, *Love and Death*. Allen, with each successive production, had to recognise a deceptively concealed reality: that his standing with the film world's financial backers was only as firm as the box office returns from his last picture.

His maverick talent lacks the known standards of success: the star casts, vastly expensive hype of each element, and the

spurious belief that money lavished on exotic sets and pampered players will attract public support. Woody simply makes movies in the only way he can. He once explained: 'I'm not "Chaplinesque". And above all, I'm not "cerebral"'. Why does a pair of glasses automatically make you "cerebral"? Sex and death are two fairly elementary subjects, and they are my two biggest themes - because they interest me the most. My reactions to everyday situations seem normal to me, but completely hilarious to everyone else. And most of the time I can't figure out why.'

More than the clown with the painted smile, Allen is a classic case: the sufferer who makes fun of his pain. In us all is at least a small part of his 'little loser'; recognition of this lends his appeal a universal charisma. He uses his genius as a comic actor to mock individual neuroses, and he presents such performances in a way as to indict the society which causes such neuroses. It is like seeing Chaplin directed by Billy Wilder - brilliant comic insight and acid irony, combined as critique.

When Allen attempted *overt* satire, he was frustrated by the distributors. His tv movie about one 'Richard Dixon' and 'Harvey Wallinger', planned to coincide with the run-up period to Nixon's second-term election, was withdrawn and all copies were destroyed. Appearing in Martin Ritt's ironic treatment of McCarthyism, *The Front* (1976), the stand against right-wing prejudices was lost due to limited circulation and censorship.

With 1977 and *Annie Hall*, Allen became more autobiographical and began to use humour as a counterpart to stories intended as poignant tragedies of New York. Alvy Singer, a Jewish comedian, falls in love with Annie (Diane Keaton), a mixed-up midwestern WASP, and immediately tries to turn her into somebody she isn't - somebody as culturally-hip, guilt-ridden and insecure as he is - so he won't have to risk something 'permanent'. Eventually, Annie goes out to Hollywood, leaving Alvy back in the solitary world of the misunderstood misanthropes.

As the story ends, Allen narrates the



Mia Farrow in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*.

anecdote of a man who seeks a psychiatrist's advice about his brother. 'He thinks he's a chicken,' he explains. 'You'd better turn him in,' says the doctor. 'I can't,' the man replies, 'I need the eggs.' Woody concludes: 'That's the trouble with human relationships. They're irrational, crazy, stupid . . . but we need the eggs.' The 'serious' film on this theme, *Interiors* (1978), is Allen's most disappointing work - exhibiting the very kind of pretentiousness he is so skilled in deflating elsewhere.

With *Zelig* (1983), we see a schizoid *nebische* (a nobody) who actually wins the love of his psychiatrist (Mia Farrow), thus realising every neurotic's dream of glory. *Zelig* is a kind but hopelessly confused person, unable to match his own personality to the perplexing facts of life in pre-Hitler Germany, finding himself transformed, chameleon-like, into replicas of the domineering figures surrounding him. The film undermines the cult of celebrity.

Allen is attracted to leftism, but repulsed by radical chic, and intrigued by ideas whilst incensed by intellectual poseurs. In *Annie Hall*, he silences a remorseless movie bore by producing

Marshall McLean to call him a charlatan. The corruption in elitist political groups is satirised in *Bananas*. Throughout *Stardust Memories* (1980), Allen snipes at the expense of academic duplicity ('I'm doing this piece on the shallow indifference of wealthy celebrities'), and the intellectualisation of simple things. Tolerantly, he perceptively describes intellectuals as 'like the Mafia, they only kill their own'.

*The Purple Rose of Cairo* augurs well for the future, with Woody producing his most coherent narrative yet, and his most sympathetic treatment of women. Cecilia (played by Mia Farrow) is a maltreated wife who seeks refuge in the screen fantasies at the Jewel Cinema. One day, when viewing *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the hero steps off the screen and into her life, leaving the other characters stranded. Cecilia has to choose between the 'perfect' character and the 'imperfect' actor who plays him. Allen's film brilliantly draws attention to the magic and the mendacity of the movies, dealing as it does with the use of popular culture as an escape mechanism in times of economic hardship. Eschewing the 'anti-film' didacticism of a Godard, Allen achieves a very thoughtful treatment of important artistic and social problems whilst simultaneously making an extremely funny film.

Woody Allen's storytelling is always peripatetic, from the early archipelagoes of skits to later, more unified arrangements of scenes; he prefers magically materialising in a situation rather than bothering us with tales of how he got there. The problems are present, and Allen is the first to question the value of a humorous solution. The old organ-grinders burned their monkey's feet with matches in order to prolong their dance; as Woody exclaims, 'no one's going to make a monkey out of me'. His aloofness is borne of necessity.

A penultimate scene in *Stardust Memories* has the comic director visited by Spielberg-like space creatures. He explains his dissatisfaction with how he has used his talents. 'We enjoy your movies', the alien leader replies. 'Particularly the early funny ones'. The only service he can do humanity is to 'tell funnier jokes'. In fact, Woody Allen is the most subversive of modern commercial film-makers, alerting us to the absurdities of a society wherein such features appear so 'amusing'. It is because Woody Allen is so serious that he seems so funny.

