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# Slide! *skit & song Summer '85*

## *The Purple Rose of Cairo*/Terrence Rafferty

Woody Allen makes jokes about God the way other comedians make jokes about their wives. In his new movie, God is either Fred Astaire, whose voice—singing 'Heaven, I'm in Heaven,' the opening line of 'Cheek to Cheek'—is both the first and the last voice we hear, or the unseen pair of hack writers who concocted a movie called *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the sort of 30s comedy in which Broadway sophisticates mix *very* dry martinis before rushing out to catch the floor show at the Copa and the innocent hero, Tom Baxter, exclaims, 'To think that only yesterday I was in an Egyptian tomb and now here I am on the verge of a madcap Manhattan weekend!'

This glittering black and white world—within the full-colour world of the Woody Allen movie called *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Rank)—is Allen's sweetest and funniest version of the afterlife, his greatest God joke ever, because it's really awfully silly, full of spirits so blithe they verge on idiocy, and the creator's grip isn't quite as firm as it seems to be: one of these debonair beings, the gallant, open-faced archaeologist chap from the Egyptian tomb, steps right off the screen in a New Jersey movie house and carries off a young woman from the audience. He's an angel escaped from the choir, a virgin sprung.

This impossible event throws the Depression-era Jersey town into an uproar, as planeloads of Hollywood types, including the alarmed producer Raoul Hirsch, descend on the little theatre—and transports the lucky woman from the audience, a timid, dreamy housewife named Cecilia, into a state of blissful romantic confusion. It's a more familiar sort of miracle to us, and to Woody Allen: no stranger than the

magic-lantern apparitions of *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, the infinite transformations of Leonard Zelig, or the magical bedroom farce of 'The Kugel-mass Episode,' whose unfortunate hero shuttles back and forth between his dreary life in New York and a passionate affair with Emma Bovary, and winds up trapped in a book called *Remedial Spanish*. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (both Allen's film and Raoul Hirsch's), people just materialise—here one minute, there the next, and everything in between has been edited out.

To think: Tom Baxter was in this swanky apartment just a blink of the eye ago, and now he's at the Copacabana;

Cecilia, kissing Tom in an abandoned amusement park, was at home with her brutish husband the last time we looked; the actor who 'created' Tom, Gil Shepherd, last seen at a Hollywood party, is suddenly bumping into Cecilia in New Jersey. In the world of a movie, where we never have to see the distance travelled from one place to another, the impulsive leap from the screen into the audience almost makes sense, and it's easy to see why the editing of a conventional Hollywood picture would, to a lifelong New Yorker like Woody Allen, seem an attribute of heaven: imagine getting where you want to go without having to search for a cab, stew in midtown traffic or expose yourself to the rigours of the subway. The big-screen miracle is a pair of lovers having a madcap Manhattan weekend without budging, locked in an embrace in the



*The Purple Rose of Cairo.*



centre of the frame as a bright-lights montage—El Morocco, the 21 Club—whirls by behind them.

The magic-carpet style of film-making, with scene after scene of characters who seem to have dropped into place right out of the sky, isn't wholly new to Woody Allen. He's always been fond of jumping from one spot to another, from his first movies, which were constructed in chunks of autonomous shtick, archipelagoes of skits, to later and more unified arrangements of bits, like *Annie Hall* and *Zelig*; his restlessness is less arbitrary, more artful now, but he's still reluctant to show the connecting material, the hard travelling of narrative—the progress of the characters from one comic or dramatic moment to the next.

One of the reasons why Allen's last movie, *Broadway Danny Rose*, goes a little flat from time to time is that it's mostly about a journey, a car trip from New Jersey to Manhattan, and the story has a tendency to stall. It's a road movie made by a man who isn't really interested in how things move. (And the people in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, living through the Depression in a town whose plant has closed, gamble and hustle and fantasise in movie houses because they can't believe in progress, either.) What is new about *Purple Rose* is the effortless way it glides over the gaps, a combination of airiness and intricacy so graceful that we barely notice the steps and little jumps, but see only a smooth dance routine—and all achieved within the frame of the story, without the benefit of the kinds of intervention which have served Woody Allen so well in the past: the voice-over monologue, the mock-documentary narration, even his own presence as an actor.

Here, Woody Allen speaks through his story and through his actors, and the acting is inspired. The cast of the movie within the movie, which includes John Wood, Edward Herrmann, Deborah Rush, Zoe Caldwell and Van Johnson, are an hilarious formal dress ensemble, lounging and complaining in their penthouse set as they wait for Tom Baxter to return from his foray into the outside world, all of them vapid and cheerful and dazed, as if the thin air up there on screen had made them light-headed. Jeff Daniels, looking a little goofy under Tom Baxter's pith helmet but wholesomely dashing in Gil Shepherd's Hollywood threads, gives a finely shaded and very funny performance, shuttling easily between the perfect innocence of the movie hero and the more calculated boyishness of the career-wise young actor (who's hoping to play a real hero, Charles Lindbergh, and become a star). And Mia Farrow's Cecilia is a wonderful creation, a woman who always seems to be looking up—at her looming husband, at the tall, noble frame of Tom or Gil, and, constantly, at the huge figures on the screen. As

Farrow plays her, Cecilia is enraptured and distracted (she's always dropping plates full of food), but her vivid imagination is a kind of survival skill: her life makes no sense, and her immersion in the blunt, madcap clarity of the movies gives her a peculiar strength.

Everything in this movie makes heavenly sense. Woody doesn't have to materialise on screen to pull everything

together—he remains above it all, pulling lines and characters and situations out of thin air and dropping them back to earth with flawless aim. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the creator's absence is the subtlest, slyest joke of all: we're forced to *imagine* Woody Allen, and the picture we get is a small man in top hat, white tie, and glasses, who moves, like Fred Astaire, in mysterious ways. □