

## Document Citation

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# Take the "Money" and Run

**EASY MONEY.** Directed by James Signorelli. Written by Rodney Dangerfield, Michael Endler, P.J. O'Rourke, and Dennis Blair. With Rodney Dangerfield, Joe Pesci, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Candy Azzara and Jennifer Jason Leigh. At the California, Island, Rockridge Showcase, and Southshore.

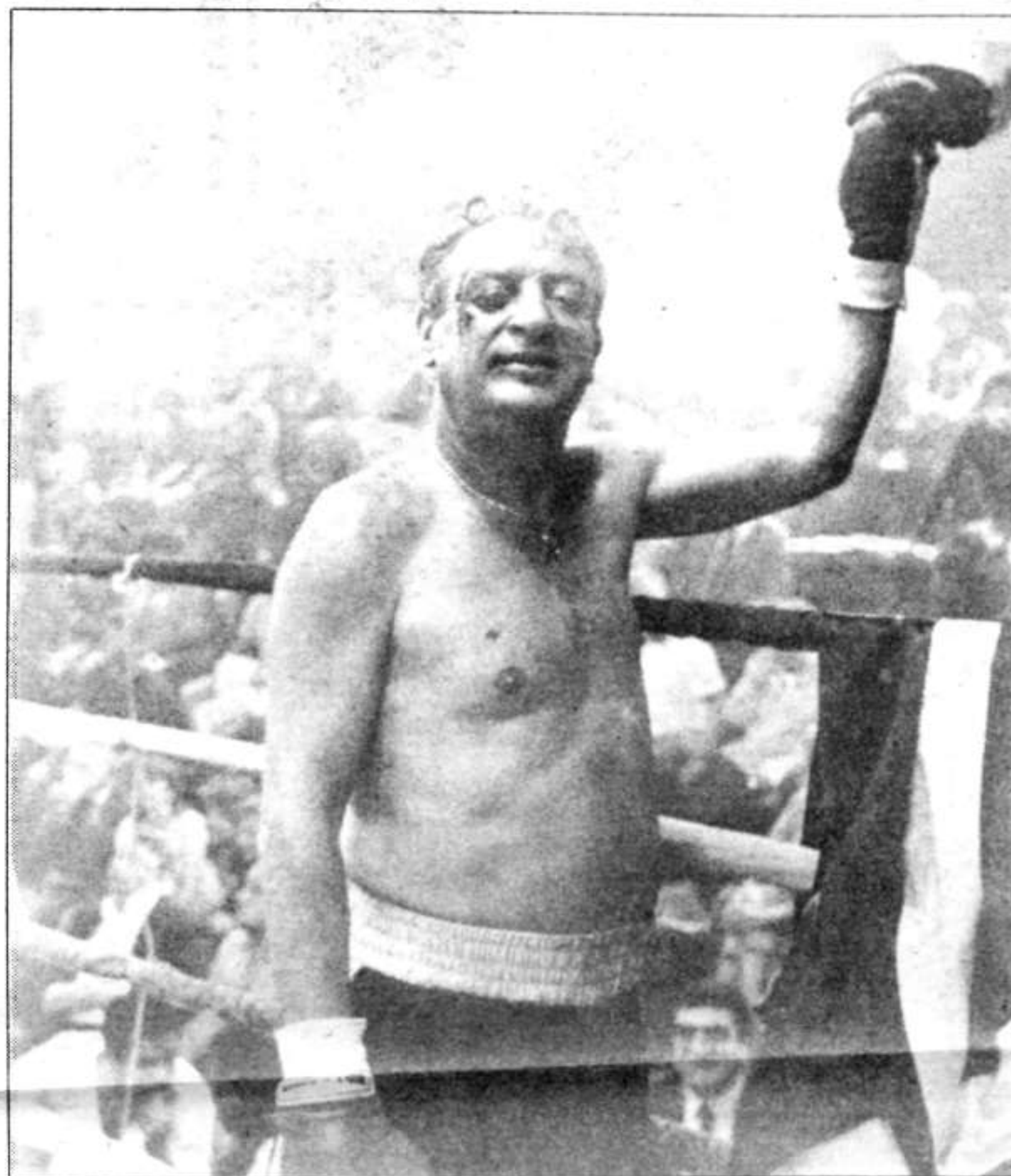
**ZELIG.** Written and directed by Woody Allen. With Woody Allen, Mia Farrow, Garrett Brown, Stephanie Farrow, Will Holt, John Rothman, Mary Louise Wilson, Deborah Rush, Sol Lomita and Marianne Tatum. At the Grand Lake and the Oaks.

By Michael Covino

Rodney Dangerfield's *Easy Money* is better than Woody Allen's *Zelig*. Which is not to say that *Easy Money* is great (it's a good solid comedy), or that *Zelig* is bad (it's a nice slight comedy). But here we have two movies, two comedies starring—of all things!—middle-aged white men, and the movies suggest radically different postures for getting through this unheroic middle age with some measure of dignity and grace. They may therefore be compared for profit.

In his 88 minute-long movie, Woody Allen himself plays Zelig, a fictional character afflicted with a

strange and unique condition: he adopts not only the personality but the physiognomy of whatever man or group of men he's with (his condition doesn't carry over to women). One documentary of the 1920s shows Zelig sitting at a table in a speakeasy with some gangsters: he looks like a gangster himself. He disappears, only to resurface a little later in the evening as a black man playing in a black jazz combo in the same speakeasy. When he's with fat people, he becomes fat. When he's with a group of psychiatrists, he becomes a psychiatrist expounding on psychiatry. We glimpse Zelig in background shots joining Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig for spring training with the Yankees in Florida. For a while the "human chameleon" is even exploited by his half-sister's boyfriend, a former carnival operator. Of course the one constant in all this is the thin, sensitive face of Woody Allen: we keep looking for that face peering out from all the grainy black-and-white images of the '20s and '30s (and the seamless



Easy Money

blending of real documentary footage with fictional documentary footage has been handled adroitly by Allen).

Zelig's metamorphoses baffle the medical world and eventually he becomes a sensation of his day. His exploits are chronicled in the tabloids, and he inspires songs such as "Doin' the Chameleon" and "You May Be Six People But I Love You." In trying to explain his startling metamorphoses, the usual traumas of a mythic Jewish childhood are recounted: beatings,

humiliations, an ineffectual father, a Mrs. Portnoy of a mother. One psychiatrist in particular takes Zelig under his wings, Dr. Fletcher, a lovely, sensitive, somewhat shy analyst played by Mia Farrow. She cures him, falls in love with him; he suffers a relapse, disappears, turns up years later in the Vatican on the balcony with the Pope, at a Nazi rally in Munich. On and on it goes... for less than an hour-and-a-half.

Allen has shot and put *Zelig* together like a black-and-white documentary. The documentary footage is buttressed with present-day interviews shot in color with real people who play—parody?—themselves: Susan Sontag, Irving Howe, Bruno Bettelheim, Saul Bellow. Bellow, Famous Novelist and Nobel Prize Winner, looks like nothing so much as an advertisement for Olympia typewriters, posed as he is in his study, a solid wall of books behind him, his typewriter prominent in the left foreground with its Olympia logo more conspicuous

than the titles of any of the books. With the exception of Bettelheim, who parodies psychoanalytic jargon, none of these people comes off as particularly funny; that is, the idea of including them is funnier than the actual inclusion. Allen, here, is of course parodying the "witnesses" used by Warren Beatty in *Reds*. But then Woody Allen is parodying other movies as well. The Elephant Man, also shot in black-and-white, is suggested by the carnival exploitation of a freak, the medical profession's uproar over said freak, and the use of a kindly doctor trying to bring out what is most human in the freak. There's a parody of *Raging Bull*, too, not just with Zelig turning up

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immensely overweight, but with the insertion of color shots and home movies in a black-and-white film.

There is a problem, though: *Zelig* is never as good as any of the films it parodies. It's humorous but slight, insubstantial, not very affecting. The idea of *Zelig* is ingenious, but it degenerates eventually into a one-joke movie. Allen seems to have had to press hard to bring it up to a releasable feature length. It's padded. Parts are dull. Specific jokes are repeated. Zelig appears as a fat man several times. He appears as a black man several more times. He also appears as a Chinaman. He appears, too, as an Indian. And where else would we expect a lost, hopelessly insecure Jew (who wants so desperately to be accepted by all of humanity that he becomes whatever sector of humanity he's with) to turn up but on the balcony with the Pope, on a podium behind Hitler? The final joke will be a long, ruminative, slippery essay on *Zelig* written by Susan Sontag, who will then be revealed to be Woody Allen. Meanwhile a less ambitious joke will have to suffice. In the *Village Voice* Andrew Sarris, who calls Zelig "the *Citizen Kane* of screen spoofs," pens these unhappy, ill-chosen, miserable words: "I believe *Zelig* will flourish primarily as a

comedy for the cognoscenti. It is really too good and too imaginative for the pabulum-craving masses." Bah!