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Mia Farrow and Jeff Daniels: when you wish upon a star

# It happened one matinee

## Woody takes Mia to the movies

by Scott Rosenberg

**THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO.** Written and directed by Woody Allen. With Mia Farrow, Jeff Daniels, and Danny Aiello. An Orion picture. At the Sack Paris, the Harvard Square, and the Circle.

For as long as he's made movies, Woody Allen has made movies about fans, but in Allen's world, the fans have never enjoyed their nights out. In *Play It Again, Sam*, Allen was a Bogart-idolizing schlemiel who could never live up to his big-brother figure's style; in *Stardust Memories* he played a celebrity director revolted by the loathsome crowds of his sycophantic admirers. For Allen, films have always been a source of neurotic torment, not to mention an irresistible compulsion — in *Annie Hall*, *The Sorrow and the Pity* was his idea of a fun date. For a director with lofty

intellectual ambitions, of course, even one who started as a comedian, the moviehouse is a deadly serious haunt: it's not an entertainment palace but a workplace.

In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, for the first time, Allen puts aside his directorial ego and looks through a fan's eyes without squinting or shuddering. The film has the innocent warmth he aimed for but overshot in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*; his cynicism and misanthropy are held in check by a new enthusiasm for simpler emotions — it's as if he'd regained his screen virginity. *Purple Rose* is the story of Cecilia, a New Jersey greasy-spoon waitress who fights Depression blues and forgets the drabness of her marriage to an unemployed brute by gorging herself on escapist '30s films. The joke is, while she's trying to escape "real life" in the celluloid dreamscape, the matinee-idol character

in the film she repeatedly watches (also called *The Purple Rose of Cairo*) jumps off the screen and into her arms: this pith-helmeted explorer who talks in romantic-comedese wants to escape the confines of script and frame to learn about "real life" firsthand.

The reality games here have some quirky and inconsistent rules. Although it's designed as a homage to old-fashioned movies and moviegoing, *Purple Rose* takes off from theatrical precedent as much as from cinema: the film-within-the-film is a tuxedo-bedecked Noel Coward high-society comedy that jaunts from Cairo to the Copa (its first line: "Jason, I'm bored"); and more important, the entire concept of rebellious characters crossing a dimensional warp into "real life" is straight out of Pirandello (via Allen's own story "The Kugelmass Episode" and his script for *Play It Again, Sam*). *Purple Rose* is Allen's *Six Characters in Search of an Auteur*, and it suffers from the same incapacity that usually cripples productions of Pirandello's play: the impossibility of convincing an audience that the scripted "real life" characters and dialogue are any more "real" than the invading figures from the land of the imagination. Both are puppets of the writer, and one's supposed rebellion is as predetermined as the other's ostensible freedom.

But in *Purple Rose* Allen further muddies the conceptual waters by relying on gentle parodies of screen clichés not only for his film-within-the-film — which is as on-the-mark a compendium of '30s stock types and situations as you could wish, and as funny — but also for the two "real worlds" he presents. Cecilia's tawdry home life gets a '50s kitchen-sink realism treatment: her beer-guzzling, bull-necked husband could be Stanley Kowalski. And the coterie of Hollywood honchos who fly in to Jersey to quell the film-land uprising — a bespectacled director, a pinstriped agent, and the actor who played the role of Tom Baxter, the runaway character — could have wandered in from a Preston Sturges film. *Purple Rose* doesn't so much set art against life as cross-cut among fictions from different schools.

As he's proved from his earliest exercise in film tampering, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?*, through the recent technical tour-de-force *Zelig*, Allen is a master artificer of film. *Purple Rose* works best when it ditches its existential inquest and focuses on what he still, after all these years and Bergman imitations, does best: one-liners, both visual and verbal. These abound in the film-within-the-film scenes, particularly after Baxter goes AWOL: the characters on screen in the movie theater mill around, bitch at one another, and taunt the audience, which is growing restless and indignant at the sudden stall in the plot. Zoe Caldwell as a haughty, boaladen countess peers out from the screen and asks, "I wonder what it's like out there . . . They don't look like they're having much fun." Ed Herrmann as a twitty bon vivant throws a bug-eyed fit when the theater manager threatens to turn off the projector: "It gets dark . . . we disappear!" Allen even adds an entertaining dab of science-fiction corn to the Pirandellian shenanigans. After Baxter flees the screen, you hear a voice call to him from the hubbub on film, "You're on the wrong side!" — as if Mr. Spock had by accident beamed himself into the

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Zoe Caldwell and Van Johnson: screen gems

says to her, "The most human of your attributes is your ability to choose," he could be Captain Kirk delivering a lecture on humanism to some redeemable renegade.

Allen's absence from the cast is hardly noticeable; in her fourth film under his tutelage, Mia Farrow now sounds almost exactly like him — she's got the same earnest "I — I — I..." stammer, the same heightened inarticulateness that Diane Keaton developed for Allen's movies (is it sexually transmitted?). Farrow's Cecilia is clumsy and dreamy, like Keaton's Allen-directed women, but she's less self-conscious, more hard-headed; she's always shooting down Baxter's invitations to "live on love" by pointing out the two of them are penniless. (Speaking of which, I'm informed by some Depression-era moviegoers — my parents — that a Cecilia couldn't have afforded to go to the movies more than once a week without sacrificing her meals.) Farrow

and Jeff Daniels make a happy couple, as gently implausible as Allen intends. Daniels has a naive, aw-shucks smile as Baxter, and he lays on a crafty arrogance in his other role as the Hollywood actor — he basks in Farrow's compliments as if they were a massage, playing her for deeper and deeper ego rubs. And *Purple Rose* boasts hordes of shrewdly selected cameos — especially in the film-within-the-film, where actors like Van Johnson and Milo O'Shea play stereotypes their own careers have created. (The '30s *Purple Rose of Cairo*, in fact, looks like more fun than its contemporary equivalent, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and Baxter's a goofier, funnier hero than Indiana Jones any day.) Only Danny Aiello seems stiff and uninteresting as Cecilia's penny-pitching husband: he's a cliché without self-awareness.

It's easy enough to accept, and enjoy, Allen's basic plan for *The Purple Rose of Cairo* — to give concrete, fairy-tale shape to the

dreams of someone who's buried her head in Hollywood fantasies. He makes it too easy, in fact. *Purple Rose* is further evidence, along with the cleverer *Zelig*, of Allen's one-liner intellect: he gets great ideas and tosses them off as trifles instead of pursuing their implications (which don't have to be heavy-handed or serious). In this case, Allen replaces the starry-eyed escapism of '30s comedy with the equally bland escapism of '80s nostalgia. *Purple Rose* is happy to celebrate movies in which nothing was at stake, for characters and audience alike; it presents the world of art as a place where no one's hair gets mussed, where you can be distracted from the "real world" without learning anything new about it. Cecilia can visit her Wonderland, but she can't take anything home, not even knowledge; Allen hobbles her fantasies when he should be giving them wings. □

## Purple

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void. Unfortunately, when Allen gets more pretentious, as in a head-to-head confrontation between the Baxter character and the actor who played him, the dialogue takes on a wooden, over-explanatory quality that's also reminiscent of *Star Trek*. When, at the film's climax, Cecilia has to decide between her two loves — actor and character — and Baxter