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PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG NEUROTIC

"... Woody Allen's most consistently funny film, *Annie Hall* has some moments that may signal a rewarding new development in his career..."

No American filmmaker works with more freedom than Woody Allen; he is the one true American *auteur*. His films never make huge profits, but they have a guaranteed audience, and so he is permitted to take chances; his comedies are literate, subtle, cerebral and experimental in the liberties they take with conventional cinematic structure. They also have a defiantly personal quality that is unparalleled in contemporary American movies.

In a sense all of Allen's films are about himself—the insecure, bungling, sexually ravenous schlemiel—but *Annie Hall* (written with his frequent collaborator, Marshall Brickman) is his most deeply personal and autobiographical work to date. This movie about a successful comedian and his unsuccessful romantic relationships is clearly based on Woody Allen's firsthand experiences, especially his long-term relationship with Diane Keaton. Other directors have tried to make autobiographical movies, but Allen is virtually the only one who has managed to bring it off. In turning inward he has found a richer, more realistic vein of comedy than ever before. There are sacrifices: *Annie Hall* doesn't have the mad peaks of *Bananas* or *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*, but it is more consistently funny than any of Woody's previous films. It also has moments of tenderness and wistfulness that may signal a rewarding new development in Allen's career.

One danger of autobiographical fiction is that sometimes the artist doesn't have enough distance on his personal obsessions. In *Annie Hall* Woody Allen seems unaware of the possibility that some of us may not share his delirious infatuation with Diane Keaton. She has comic gifts, and a modest, dithering kind of charm. But I don't think I am the only one who finds her charms limited. The movie suggests that Alvy Singer loves Annie Hall because she is even more insecure and neurotic than he is; if that also explains Diane Keaton's appeal for Woody Allen, her appeal may also be too private for the rest of us to apprehend. As a director Allen treats his costar too indulgently;



he even allows her to sing an entire song, and her rendition is far from thrilling.

Diane Keaton's gaucherie keeps *Annie Hall* from being an incandescent romantic comedy; but at least she keeps us laughing. The exhilarating thing about Woody Allen's movies is that he has no sacred cows. His satire is gleefully evenhanded; virtually no one comes out unscathed. He certainly doesn't spare himself in dissecting the failure of Alvy's relationship with Annie. It may be Allen's innate skepticism that accounts for the emotional reticence of his films; his indestructible sense of absurdity prevents him from taking anyone or anything completely seriously. Yet what distinguishes the great comedies from the merely good ones is an underlying core of serious feeling. Allen still seems overly nervous about expressing emotion. As Annie tells Alvy, "I don't think you like emotion too much." At least Allen is aware of his limitations, and he's trying to stretch himself. *Annie Hall* falls short of greatness, but it represents a promising step forward by our most gifted and inventive comic artist.