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WOODY DOESN'T KINK HIS WHIP

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By Andrew Sarris

STARDUST MEMORIES Directed and written by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Released by United Artists.

Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* should separate the skeptics from the sycophants, which is to say that I can honestly recommend this movie only to people who would consider it a privilege to pay \$5 to watch Woody gargle in the men's room at Elaine's. From the evidence of *Stardust Memories*, Woody himself seems to believe that the world is full of poor, wretched, ugly Allen-addicts who are reduced to helpless laughter by the mere mention of his name or the slightest frowning of his brow. All this adulation drives him to distraction. Why cannot his adoring fans understand that these desperate times call for him to emulate Franz Kafka rather than Groucho Marx? As I watched *Stardust Memories* stagger along for its tortured 90 minutes as if it were at least a full hour longer, I had the eerie feeling that I was watching the outtakes from the wittier and funnier movie I had thought Woody could make in his sleep after *Manhattan*. Perhaps the departure of Diane Keaton had left behind a vacuum that Federico Fellini could not begin to fill. Perhaps all that had ever redeemed Allen as an artist and as a human being had been what he had once felt for this magical screen personality. *Manhattan*, particularly, still strikes me as a creative miracle in the context of an otherwise problematic career. I have never been part of the anti-Allen backlash that seems to have accompanied his emergence as a megacelebrity with the megabucks, but then I had never gone bananas over *Bananas* either. His sour sensibility and intermittent wisecracks were insufficient to prop up his rickety farcical-satirical narratives. It was only when bittersweet romance was added to the mixture in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* that Allen was able to express his feelings in fully articulated feature films. In between these two achievements was the misguidedly Bergmanesque *Interiors*, which played away from his talents and toward his pretensions. Chicken soup was thickened solemnly into a puree of platitudes. Even so, *Interiors* was all of a piece, whereas *Stardust Memories* is a patchwork quilt full of unfinished patterns.

The very beginning of *Stardust Memories* promises more than it delivers. Woody Allen is trapped in a train full of ugly, joyless grotesques. On a parallel track is a train full of happy, prosperous, good-natured revelers endowed with all the creature comforts. Allen's very physical nightmare consists of his futile effort to escape from one train to the other. He has expanded Fellini's suffocating traffic jam in *8 1/2* to the point of providing a distinctively ironic variation on one of the maestro's most striking effects. Later, the two groups of passengers converge on the same oceanside garbage dump, but the flickering idea inherent in the image is immediately snuffed out by a wrenchingly Pirandellian return to the movie director-celebrity reality of Woody Allen's Sandy Bates. As it turns out, there is far more of Woody in Sandy than there is of Sandy in Woody. For a film that employs an ostentatiously autobiographical format, *Stardust Memories* is remarkably evasive and misleading. Heaven knows that Fellini himself was self-serving in *8 1/2*. The casting of Marcello Mastroianni as his alter ego, for example, tended to glamorize Fellini's own rawer and more childish sexism. Nonetheless, *8 1/2* is packed with brilliant insights into the metier of filmmaking. Fellini's genius for colorful detail, wistful reverie, and the mad whirl of subjective sensations is rooted in an incredible recollection of the graphics of existence. By contrast, Allen's "memories" are almost completely blocked by

mock-literary exaggerations of experience. These exaggerations are, of course, the essence of his comic strategy, but they are eventually more trouble than they are worth on the screen. That Woody has gotten more mileage out of these too-frequently strained sight "gags" than they deserve can be attributed to the fact that they sound better in print than they look on film. It is not surprising, therefore, that every intimation of Woody-Sandy's childhood in *Stardust Memories* ends up as a failed parody of Fellini's lyricism.

The standard line with any imitator of Fellini's *8 1/2*—Paul Mazursky (*Alex in Wonderland*) and Bob Fosse (*All That Jazz*) come immediately to mind—is that said imitator is shamelessly self-indulgent in telling us more about the director than we really want to know. The same criticism can be applied ultimately even to Fellini. In the end, only Fellini can get

play in Peoria? *Stardust Memories* itself may never play in Peoria. So how come all the cut-rate imitations of the hilarious Hollywood industry types in Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels*?

Certainly, there was no sign of the real Woody Allen at all the jammed previews last week at the Baronet into which we inkstained wretches of the Fourth Estate were jammed like sardines. According to the gossip columnists, Woody has flown to Paris with his latest lady love. He did not want to be in New York when all the vulgar journalistic hullabaloo over his latest opus hit the newsstands. It was clearly his decision and no one else's to preview the film for most of the press only three days before its surprisingly sudden opening on the same date as the New York Film Festival's first-night showing of Jonathan Demme's *Melvin and Howard*. It was clearly his decision also to provide

coup has made his "private life" any happier is another question, but one which is becoming increasingly difficult to ask with a straight face. The fact that one remains mortal even as one rises into a higher tax bracket hardly calls for the invocation of Schopenhauer. Mel Brooks was closer to the metaphysical mark in *The Producers* when he had the late Zero Motel proclaim to a conspicuously consuming arriviste on the street below: "Flaunt it while you've got it, baby."

Flaunting it seems to be the last thing Sandy Bates wants to do. Guilt, shame, embarrassment, and exasperation stalk his success like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. *Stardust Memories* is the most mean-spirited and misanthropic film I have seen in years and years from anyone anywhere. Woody Allen's one spark of absolute originality may consist of his having discovered somewhere on the Jersey

FILMS IN FOCUS



"Stardust Memories": not only the rabbit died

away with being Fellini, and he just barely. It has always been my suspicion that the most ardent worshippers of *8 1/2* have relied more on their blissfully selective memories of the dreamier moments than on frequent returns to the film as a whole, *longueurs* and all, in revival.

The Fellini connection, however, does not get one very far with *Stardust Memories*, in that Woody's projection of his own personal crisis through Sandy lacks any stylistic convention or professional credibility. For one thing, Sandy juggles the three women in his life—Charlotte Rampling, Jessica Harper, Marie-Christine Barrault—as clumsily as Woody juggles the time slots in which these three victimized creatures function. For another, Sandy whines endlessly about situations that Woody has artfully avoided for most of his career. When was the last time, I wonder, that Woody Allen addressed an audience of film enthusiasts, and when was the last time, I wonder also, that Allen allowed himself to be bulldozed by the kind of studio executive who worried about how one of Woody's

advance peeks to *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the editorial board of *The New York Times*. just in case any of these publications saw fit to burden him with some of the high-powered promotion less sensitive types than he craved so desperately. Woody's con as the publicity-shy genius has worn thin in the past few years. How often can one find J. D. Salinger in Michael's Pub or Elaine's or even on a crowded street? I hardly profess to know the "real" Woody Allen, though I have bumped into him on a few occasions and have found him reasonably pleasant and friendly. On talk shows, he has indicated a self-imposed limitation on the size of his audiences across the country. Once he had assumed full command of his career, he never bothered to dilute his humor or personality, as Bette Midler has done, in order to become accessible to the masses of Middle America. Instead, he has made Middle America come to him as a class attraction out of New York, much as if he had been the original cast of a Broadway stage hit on tour through all the boon-docks. Whether his astounding career

shore a unique Sahara of the soul. He has populated the screen with many of the ugliest faces he and his casting director could find, and the very few good-looking people that pop up from time to time are afflicted with ugly contexts and motivations. Fellini at least acknowledged the existence of an intelligent scenarist and a shrewd producer in his entourage. No equivalents of independently witty screenwriter Marshall Brickman and enlightened producers Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe pop up in *Stardust Memories*. Nor is there any acknowledgment of the existence of intelligent, self-confident detractors of Woody Allen. Tony Roberts is on hand briefly in his familiar allorical role as the Cynical Actor, although not also as the Good-Looking Stud-Nemesis. By this time it is not regarded as even passing strange that a non-Adonis like Allen should be functioning as a sex symbol. In *Stardust Memories*, however, the uglier and more paranoid side of the American obsession with star-fucking comes to the fore in the ever-suspicious and ever-

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