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Allen cherishes culture high and low

Details make the difference

By Janet Maslin
New York Times

THERE'S a moment of pure happiness in Woody Allen's new "Radio Days" in which the narrator's Cousin Ruthie appears with a towel on her head, doing a little dance.

Though not the Latin fireball type — Cousin Ruthie ordinarily wears white anklets and spends time gossiping with her mother about the neighbors — she has done what she can with this improvised turban and some junk jewelry. With a smile of tremendous satisfaction, she is prancing and swaying to Carmen Miranda's "South American Way" and lip-synching the song perfectly. And when two of Ruthie's male relatives wander into this scene and see what she's doing, they understand. In the same spirit of delight they begin lip-synching, delivering the "Ai-yi's" right on cue.

The scene is wonderful not just for Ruthie's dancing but for what it illustrates so viscerally about popular art's ability to brighten lives. Allen has touched on this many times before, most notably in "The Purple Rose of Cairo," but in "Radio Days" he gives it his full attention.

In "Radio Days," which is set between the late '30s and 1944, the radio is heard constantly and its influence is everywhere. It affects everything, from the outcome of a

date to the aftermath of a robbery. In one scene, it even makes a palpable difference in the way a father feels about his child.

Allen has always made a point of defining his characters in aesthetic and intellectual terms as well as dramatic ones. Particularly in his films from "Annie Hall" onward, he has taken care to let audiences know not just what characters do but also what they see and hear and read.

These details have an indelible effect: Will anyone forget that Annie Hall and Alvy Singer were waiting to see "The Sorrow and the Pity" at the Beekman when they got into the argument about (and including) Marshall McLuhan? Or that Isaac, the television writer Allen played in "Manhattan," counted Flaubert's "Sentimental Education" and the second movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony — not to mention Groucho Marx and Willie Mays — among his reasons for living?

Allen's references to art, ideas and pop cultural artifacts aren't always this conspicuous. Indeed, they grow less and less so as he becomes more amazingly assured with each new film. It happens, in "Hannah and Her Sisters," that Mia Farrow is seen reading Richard Yates' "Easter Parade," a novel about two sisters and their lifelong rivalry, but Allen does nothing to call attention to that detail; it is simply there.

Nor is it necessary to know that the Gershwin songs in "Manhattan" comment so aptly on the action ("Someone to Watch Over Me" for the night when Isaac finds himself falling for the abrasive intellectual played by Diane Keaton; "But Not for Me" in his final encounter with the schoolgirl Tracy) to sense their profound effect on the film's mood.

It can be argued that this is little more than cultural name-dropping, in keeping with the comfortable, tasteful settings in which Allen's affluent characters often live; he has sometimes been accused of creating yuppie porn. But Allen clearly has at least as much enthusiasm for low art as for high, and the lower the better: spotlighting a balloon sculptor, a dressed parrot and a blind xylophone player, as Allen did in "Broadway Danny Rose," is surely the act of a genuine aficionado.

Even when Allen's taste for pop cultural anomalies seems cruel, as it sometimes does in that film, it is redeemed by the obvious sincerity of his affection. Are "Mairzy Doats" and "Tico Tico," both of which turn up in "Radio Days," great songs? Maybe not, but there's something deliriously silly about them, something capable of generating the most innocent sort of joy. "Radio Days" is a jubilant yet graceful salute to that innocence.

Like "Brighton Beach Memoirs," "Radio Days" is set in Brooklyn during World War II, and the domestic scenes in the two films have some slight similarity (though Allen's film, with its ravishing cinematography and outstandingly witty costume and production design, is by far the better looking).

It may well be that "Brighton

Film



Tony Roberts and Dianne Wiest in 'Radio Days'

Beach Memoirs" uses period radio broadcasts in its sound track, but if so, they aren't memorable in the slightest.

But in "Radio Days," the large extended family of the nameless boy narrator (Allen's voice is heard on the sound track) cares passionately about what it hears. Everyone has a favorite show: Uncle Abe (Josh Mostel) loves the crazy sports stories ("He had one leg and one arm, but more than that he had heart . . ."), while his wife, Ceil, admires a certain ventriloquist ("How do you know he's not movin' his lips?" Uncle Abe wants to know). And the young narrator adores a swashbuckling hero called the Masked Avenger. This is radio, so the Masked Avenger is played by — who else? — Wallace Shawn.

If the people in the film define themselves somewhat by their radio favorites, they also can't help but note the contrast between the real world and the one they hear about. "I suppose you woulda been happier married to Rita Hayworth?" asks Aunt Ceil, who's lying in bed eating chocolates, with her hair in curlers at the time. And Uncle Abe doesn't exactly have an answer.

Over the breakfast dishes in Rockaway, the narrator's mother listens to a couple of swells named Roger and Irene, who dine in their Manhattan townhouse while recounting the previous night's round of parties, dropping names like "Moss" and "Cole."

Unlike Cecilia, the movie fan played by Farrow in "The Purple Rose of Cairo," this mother (played by Julie Kavner) doesn't reflect moonily that "the people were so beautiful — they spoke so beautifully and they did such romantic things!" She's bemused but not starstruck, being too busy to enjoy the luxury of such intoxicating reveries.

daydreams are a thing of the past.

Even the film's rare tragic notes have a hopeful quality, thanks to radio's power to stir the emotions. As the narrator's father listens to the live news accounts of a disaster involving a small child, he stops in midspan to embrace his own son. Hours later, in his and many other households and public places, listeners are seen silently following the story and remembering how much they care for their own loved ones.

And the story of the narrator's marriage-minded Aunt Bea, who is played with such sweetness and intelligence by Dianne Wiest, is also somehow inspirational, in spite of Bea's many radio-related disappointments. (Her look of dejection and then acceptance with one suitor, when the radio plays his dead fiancée's favorite songs, makes for one of the film's finest moments.)

When all else fails, Bea finds reason to rejoice in something as simple as forming an impromptu conga line with her sisters around the dining room table. Even now, the narrator remains deeply grateful to her for such revelations as "The Donkey Serenade." (Dick Hyman, the musical supervisor responsible for several dozen extremely well-chosen songs plus a very hummable laxative jingle, is one of the film's unsung heroes.)

Allen embraces these memories of a more ingenuous popular culture in an uncommonly wholehearted way. Even a shot of young girls' saddle shoes, swaying at a

soda fountain to the music of a romantic boy crooner, can be extraordinarily expressive, and the narrator's first view of the Radio City Music Hall is so lovingly depicted that it becomes a moment of pure rapture (Frank Sinatra is heard singing, and "The Philadelphia Story" is on the screen).

On one of the film's most beautiful sets, a nightclub roof in Times Square surrounded by fabulous pop artifacts made of neon, the film's group of radio swells gather on New Year's Eve, to welcome in

1944 (back home, the narrator's family is bringing in the New Year with Hoffman's soda). The radio stars contemplate the fleetingness of their fame, and "the truth is, with the passing of each New Year's Eve, those voices do seem to grow dimmer and dimmer," Allen says.

But that hardly seems true. His "Radio Days" is a tribute that revives them, understands both their triviality and their value, and insures they will be heard for a long time to come. ■