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Author(s)	Scott Manus Scott Manus
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FILM

The Purple Rose of Cairo

Allen Treads a Thin Line

By SCOTT MANUS

I have this strange relationship with Woody Allen. Going to see one of his films is more than just going to see a "movie;" it is an exploration of the human experience. Fascinated by the struggle the conscious mind endures in seeking out the dreams of the heart, he shows us stories of people chasing their fantasies in the hopes of finding them realized. Along the way these stories are infused with twists of absurdity and comic invention.

In the midst of one of his films I find myself on the edge of my seat looking not for what's go-

ing to happen to the characters but what's going to happen to me. For I see so many of my own dilemmas, my own doubts, my own life quest finding exploration on the screen. And I am transfixed as I watch the story unfold on the screen.

So it was with genuine trepidation and excitement that I sat down in the theater and awaited his latest psychological excursion. My worst fear was that the film wouldn't address issues I would be moved by, as had his last film, *Broadway Danny Rose*, though even it had not explored the human condition with as much passion and curiosity as most of his earlier films.

The film begins with Cecilia (Mia Farrow) working during the depression in a greasy spoon diner. Her husband, an unemployed brute who hits her and sleeps around, is all that she has to look forward to. That and the movies. For Cecilia, movies are the only escape. An escape from her dreary existence and an escape to the world of her hopes and dreams. A world where love can exist, a world where people find realization and resolution. A world where life is sweet and meaningful.

As her life continues to deteriorate she goes more and more to the movies. She especially likes the current film playing at the Jewel Theater, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a romantic romp about a group of happy-go-lucky New York bon vivants who travel to Egypt where they find Tom Baxter, adventurer, traveler and archaeologist trying to find the famed "Purple rose of Cairo," supposedly buried in the tombs. They all hit it off famously and invite him back to New York where he falls in love with a night club singer.

As Cecilia sits in the audience for the ump-

teenth time, the miraculous occurs. And it is at this point that the film begins its headlong excursion into brilliance. For it is here that Tom Baxter, our adventurer, turns and looks at Cecilia and says "My, you must really love this movie." And it is just a couple of moments later that he steps from the silver screen and he and Cecilia run off away from the theater. The rest of the characters are meanwhile left bewildered and stuck in the living room of the scene, unable to continue with the film. They are, however, able to communicate with the audience and frequently engage in heated arguments with its members who insist that they continue.

Meanwhile Tom and Cecilia walk around together, he explaining that he was "sick of fantasy and wanted to really live." He is madly in love with Cecilia and wants them to run off together and live, essentially, happily ever after. While he is charming and witty and wonderful, he has his flaws. He doesn't understand very much of reality as portrayed in the real world. At one point after he and Cecilia have kissed he

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remarks, "Where's the fade out? Whenever you kiss in the movies it always fades out before the lovemaking is supposed to happen. But it's not fading out." To which Cecilia replies, "It doesn't happen that way in the real world."

The film would have been brilliant had it stopped there. But by exploring all the possible real world complications brought about by this cinematic sleight of hand, Allen offers us his vision of the reality, or more precisely, the unreality of life on the big screen. Infusing reality with illusion, illusion with substance, substance with mirage, mirage with materiality and back again, the dualistic and self-reflexive permutations become overwhelming.

And just when it appears that the film has finished with its surprises, it grows even more complex and ingenious by going the next step, by having fantasy and reality compete for Cecilia's heart. For suddenly appears Gil Shepherd, the

Hollywood actor who plays Tom Baxter in the hopes of coaxing the character he created to go back up into the screen and continue in the film. He is worried about his acting career and fears that he will be considered a troublemaker if his characters continue to leave the screen. He too is struck by Cecilia and woos her. Or as she puts it, "Now two men are in love with me, and they're both the same man."

Taking the premise of Fellini's *8 1/2* and inverting it upside down and backwards, *Purple Rose* brings the relationship between film and filmmaker and audience to its full realization. Whereas in *8 1/2*, Fellini shows us a filmmaker unsure of what to make of the film he must make, and so making that the film we see, Allen in *Purple Rose* shows us a member of the audience and a character in the film, plus the actor who portrayed that character, plus the other characters in the film leaving their realm and interacting with the audience and each in turn exposing and revealing some of the nature of each others existence.

By inverting and reversing the usual order of things, Allen has succeeded in exposing our-

selves to our own hopes and dreams, and in so doing, showing our own dilemmas within and without the characters situations inherent in our own relationship with our own struggle with perfection, reality, myth and mortality.

The nature of fantasy and illusion itself is the essential premise of this film. Using itself as a vehicle, it looks within and without itself for the medium and the message it so comedically conveys.

The characters in the film never really develop

the kinds of deep introspective conversations that one expects of Woody Allen. But that is part of the message that the film explores. Cecilia's conversations with both of the men is not much more than the kind of simplistic platitudes found in many films of this era and that. Cecilia has to choose between reality and illusion. And even then things are not what they appear to be. Even in the "real" world the thin line between reality and illusion is often far more elusive than it seems. ▼