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Fellini's Ship of Fools, Woody's Damon Runyon

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By Andrew Sarris

AND THE SHIP SAILS ON. Directed by Federico Fellini. Screenplay by Federico Fellini and Tonino Guerra. Produced by Franco Cristaldi. Released by Triumph Films.

BROADWAY DANNY ROSE. Directed and written by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Released by Orion Pictures.

Federico Fellini and Woody Allen have both known better days. Once upon a time the mere mention of their names was enough to cause a thermal inversion from massive incense-burning. This critic can remember a period in which the slightest unflattering reference to Fellini could inspire a derisive comment in a Jules Feiffer cartoon. As for Allen, the critical choice was simple: either love him, or renounce your New York nativity. Then suddenly one day their presumed "peaks" were considered behind them, and it was perfectly all right to pan their newest pictures. Fellini's X was not as good as *8½* or *La Strada* or *I Vitelloni*, and Allen's Y was not as good as *Manhattan* or *Annie Hall* or even *Bananas*.

Fortunately, both Fellini and Allen have enough of a cosmic sense of humor to appreciate both the irony and the inevitability of their situation. Nothing has changed all that much since the Ancient Greeks perceived that what goes up must come down, be it hubris, chutzpah, or just plain press-agentry. In this respect, neither *And the Ship Sails On* nor *Broadway Danny Rose* is likely to make matters worse. Both movies disappointed me somewhat inasmuch as I had admired their immediate predecessors—Fellini's *City of Women* and Allen's *Zelig*—much more than most viewers. People who positively hated *City of Women* may be reassured by the gentler reveries of *And the Ship Sails On*, and the mass of moviegoers who were thoroughly mystified by critical raves for the seemingly insubstantial *Zelig* may be relieved by the full-bodied caricatures and histrionic moralizing in *Broadway Danny Rose*. My own quirky feeling about both movies is that they were conceived much too cautiously as comebacks with the result that there is too much shadowboxing and too many pulled punches.

Nonetheless, a case can be made (and, indeed, is being made by many of my colleagues) that Fellini and Allen have somehow resurrected their reputations in the manner of Bergman with *Fanny and Alexander*. No problem. If one works hard enough nowadays one can rationalize the approval of any movie with a personal signature. This is the ultimate triumph of auteurism, I suppose; and, yet, as a card-carrying auteurist of long standing I cannot make the effort of rationalization required to make *And the Ship Sails On* and *Broadway Danny Rose* seem like more than very uneven and eventually tedious entertainments. I would not have missed either movie for the world, and I do not think that my more serious readers would feel cheated by the experience, but it would be a disservice, I think, to make larger claims for these works than they merit.

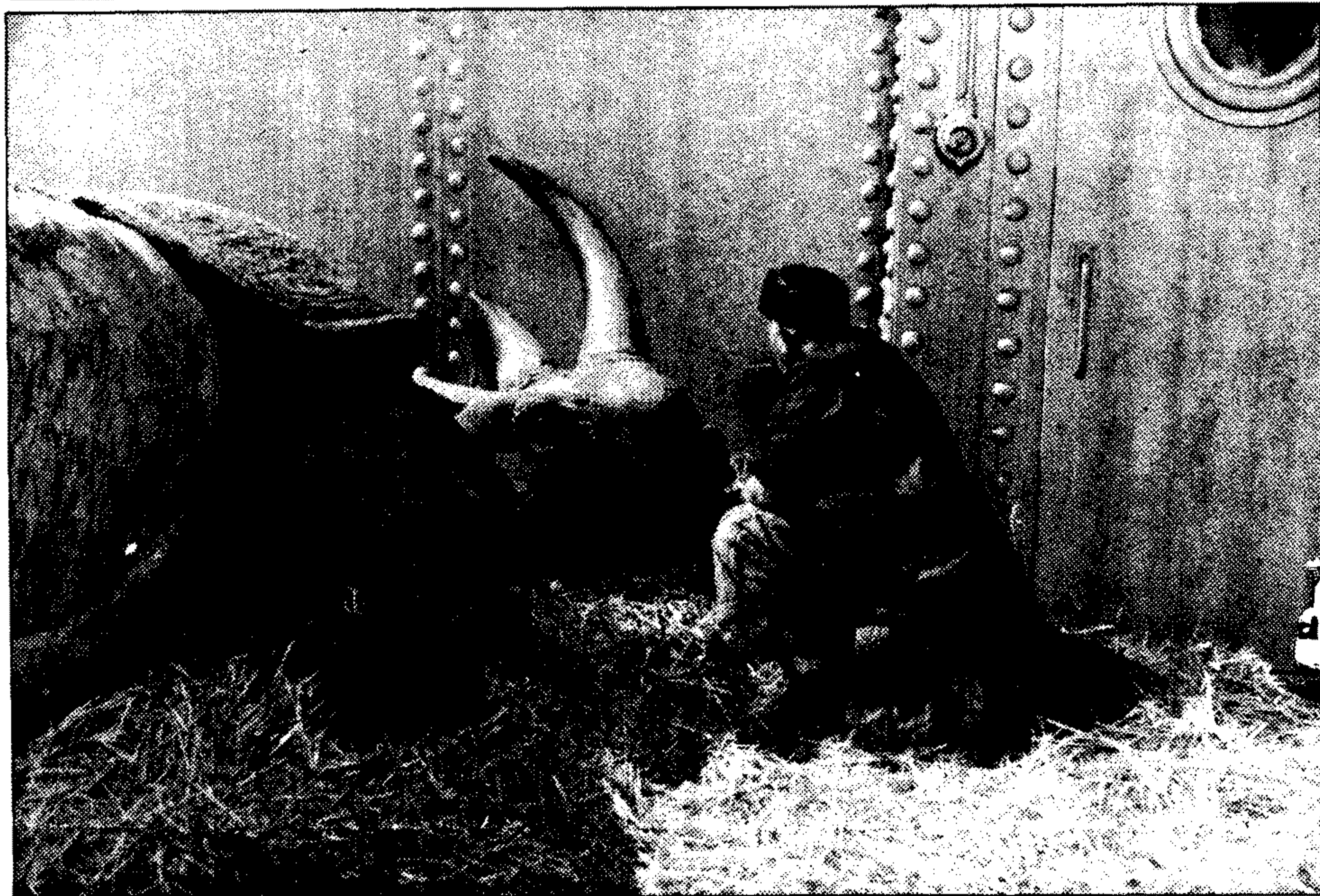
Fellini's achievement is at least formally more interesting than Allen's in that *And the Ship Sails On* makes a sustained effort to transfer the focus of Fellini's whimsical lyricism from autobiography to history, or, rather, from the personal vignettes of an eternal provincial to the collective concerns of artists caught in the backwash of history. Fellini's "artists" are, of course, complete grotesques, flamboyant freaks in both looks and gestures. A journalist named Orlando (played by a badly dubbed British actor named Freddie Jones) is the closest

equivalent of Fellini's *raisonneur* and alter ego, hitherto incarnated in the infinitely more charismatic Marcello Mastroianni. Orlando breaks into the spectacle at crucial moments to provide very necessary exposition and exegesis while staring brazenly at the camera and the audience. The year is 1914, just after Sarajevo, but just before the outbreak of the Great War. One might note that it is also the period in which the grandiloquent Italian silent cinema is about to be eclipsed forever by the more dynamic editing and behavioral realism of D. W. Grif-

lucci's more left-wing peasant arias in 1900).

One may find it harder to justify Fellini's relentless pursuit of the polymorphous and the perverse in the service of a career-long antieroticism. It is hard to see why no one in the operatic cortege looks straight and uncomplicated. This may be the trap of excessive expressionism. Could Fellini have been cruising for easy laughs through the campy posturings of his pseudo-characters? More likely, he has lost whatever vestigial feeling for narrative he ever

FILMS IN FOCUS



And the Ship Sails On: cast adrift with no lifeline

fith's *Birth of a Nation*. Curiously, there is a bit of Allen's *Zelig* in Fellini's own statement of intentions for *And the Ship Sails On*: "... I wanted to make a film in the style of the first moving pictures, which therefore would have to be in black and white, or rather, lined, with patches of humidity just like something out of an old film library. A fake, in fact, and this was what really captivated me because I think real cinema has to be like that."

The eerily soundless sequence at the beginning of the film throws into bold relief the predominantly visual genius of a director who thinks and remembers primarily with his eyes. As long as his images do not have to connect into a coherent narrative, Fellini is free to tap all the associations in the cinema's historical unconscious. The poignancy of the dead past is inscribed on every tortured grimace in Fellini's gallery of gargoyles. Few who have ever worked in the medium have possessed Fellini's facility with the quick brush strokes of expressionistic feeling. When we finally discover that all these strange figures have been convened to accompany the ashes of a deceased diva to her birthplace on an island in the Adriatic, we begin to sense a constriction of the import of all this evocative imagery. As the sepia tones of the silent past fade into the color stock of the noisy present, *And the Ship Sails On* begins to founder on the reefs of artifice and stylization. Characters and whole choruses of characters burst into song as if they were on the stage of an opera house.

Rationale number one: Italian history is essentially operatic in nature.

Rationale number two: Silent acting is essentially operatic in nature.

Rationale number three: Fellini's counterrevolutionary aesthetic treats the collectivity of mankind exclusively in terms of choral groupings (vide Berto-

possessed, and is reduced to groping for found meanings with an ever wandering camera, but without the psychological core, anchor, and axis provided in the past by the eloquently introspective Mastroianni.

Also, *And the Ship Sails On* is too much a work of the pure imagination with the result that the audience is cast adrift on a Styrofoam sea without a lifeline to any kind of recognizable reality. When a horde of Serbian refugees are picked up,

the plot seems once more on the verge of some thematic breakthrough. Unfortunately, the very grotesqueness of the upper-class operatic crowd blocks the development of any intersocietal drama. Fellini ends up making jokes about his own anti-illusionism, mixing Pirandello with Ionesco through a love-sick rhinoceros becalmed in Cinecitta, and, sadly, evading the responsibility for his own anecdote. *And the Ship Sails On* is not really a movie, but merely the latest "meditation" on what movies once were, and presumably can never be again. Signore Fellini, meet Monsieur Godard, who is much more comfortable in this self-limiting genre.