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Woody Allen's Funny Valentine

By Andrew Sarris

ANNIE HALL. Directed by Woody Allen; produced by Charles H. Joffe; written by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman. A Jack Rollins-Charles H. Joffe Production released by United Artists. At the Baronet, Little Carnegie, and 34th St. East.

Woody Allen seems to be wise beyond his years in the ways of show biz. His newest release, *Annie Hall*, has been handled with all the hush-hush hooplah one used to associate with a new Garbo opening in the '30s. For months now we have been told in the gossip columns that mum's the word on what has been happening on the scattered sets around town during the shooting. Cast members were sworn to secrecy about the plot, and the cynics among us were free to speculate that this ploy of espionage press-agentry seemed peculiar for an artist whose previous plots had served as mere pretexts for one-liners. Once the shooting had been completed, critics who did not qualify as certified sycophants were barred from the early screenings. Hence, the first word of mouth was good but vague, sometimes stoned. Woody was supposed to be real *heavy* this time, man. Rumors began to circulate about this person or that person winding up on the cutting-room floor. (Shelley Duvall was mentioned most prominently as one of the casualties.) People I trust have seen a great number of stills of shots no longer in the movie, and it is therefore possible that some of the advance word of mouth for *Annie Hall* may be referring to a longer and more solemn film than the one screened last week at the Baronet for the working press and a small army of trend-spotters.

As it turns out, Woody Allen's one-liners are better and funnier than ever. Moreover, *Annie Hall* is by far the most brilliant Woody Allen movie to date. His fans will love it, and even people who have been lukewarm to Allen will grudgingly enjoy it. The heart of the film is concerned with Woody Allen's real-life relationship with Diane Keaton. In the script (by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman), Allen and Keaton are called Alvie Singer and Annie Hall (Diane Keaton's original last name was Hall). But their cover is blown very quickly as confession begins to infiltrate contrivance. For the first time in his career Woody Allen has acknowledged his own power and eminence as a condition of his existence. The old Woody might have gone to a shrink, but he would not have had the wherewithal to pay for his girl friend's analysis. He would never have shown himself making hordes of people laugh. He would never have begun to reveal in himself all the ruthlessness any reasonably successful urban adult must exercise to survive. For the first time Woody Allen is telling it like it is—almost. And that almost seems to be the key to my persistent yes-but feelings about Allen.

It is nothing I can put my finger on exactly, and I have no advice to offer on the subject. It just strikes me from time to time that Allen is all nuance with very little substance, that much of what he says is not very original, and that he tries to play both ends against the middlebrow. A few examples should suffice until I feel sufficiently prepared to do my massive analysis of Allen's humor. In one of his *New Yorker* essays Allen made mock-literary historical reference to the date on which actors stopped reading the stage directions aloud as part of the dialogue. The implication of this gag is that nothing could be sillier than the sound of actors reciting stage directions. It is basically a middlebrow gag for the Old Lady in Dubuque who comes to New York once a year to catch up on the



Woody Allen and Diane Keaton's fictionalized romance: reminiscent of a Larry Hart lyric

FILMS IN FOCUS

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Broadway shows. Yet anyone who has followed the avant-garde theatre for the past 15 or 20 years is aware that actors have been reading stage directions and other forms of nondialogue prose as if they wished to transport themselves from the stage to the printed page. In its sweeping absurdism, Allen's gag denies the existence of an avant-garde theatre, at least as far as his readership is concerned. Yet, the unstated premise of much of Allen's satire is that he himself is the consummate intellectual, better read and better educated than the academicians and poseurs he and his audience abhor.

Hence, though Allen is a professed art-film aficionado to the point of plugging Marcel Ophul's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face*, Marcel Carne's and the late Jacques Prevert's *Les Enfants du Paradis* at such location sites as the Beekman, New Yorker, Paris, and Thalia Theatres, he nonetheless devotes considerable footage to deflating a loud-mouthed media academic who is spouting McLuhanisms. That Allen produces Marshall McLuhan himself to deliver the conversational coup de grace, and then treats the whole stunt as the cinematic equivalent of staircase wit, seems to constitute his attempt to align the audience with him against the critics. In this context, McLuhan (who has himself been accused of

glibness) is invoked less as an actual authority than as a celebrity on Allen's level. One gets the impression that if one has not been on the Johnny Carson show as often as Woody Allen, one had better not argue with Allen about philosophical questions.

Yet, academics will laugh at *Annie Hall* as loudly as anyone else. Why? Simply because they assume that Allen is ridiculing other academics. Critics will assume that Allen is ridiculing other critics. Allen's caricatures are broad enough to get every individual viewer off the hook. There is possibly one exception: Gays may be offended by his fleeting tiptoe-through-the-tulips treatment of two alleged fugitives from Fire Island. Indeed, Allen seems to flaunt the conservatism of his lifestyles with evangelical zeal by discouraging Annie's inhalation of marijuana during lovemaking, sneezing into a precious vial of cocaine, and running roughshod over the whole laid-back L. A. scene. But as I have indicated previously, the stoned set come out raving over him. Again, why? Do they assume that he is making fun of other junkies? Actually it might be said that Allen gives equal time to several alternate lifestyles through the expressive cameo performances of Tony Roberts, Paul Simon, and Christopher Walken.

And from what vantage point does Allen emerge with his witty pun about *Commentary* and *Dissent* merging into *Dissentary* (dysentery) magazine? Is he thoroughly in sympathy with the scatologically Stalinist sentiments of the pun, or is he merely indulging in generally leftist self-deprecation? One can never underestimate the extent of self-hatred in Allen's comic excavations. For example, his professed paranoia about anti-Semitism seems to break down into a compulsive repetition of the word "Jew." On occasion he seems to lift whole scenes from Philip Roth's *Good-bye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* in order to dramatize his own feelings of displacement in the arms of a *shiksa*.

Indeed, Allen comes perilously close to summing up what *Annie Hall* is all about when he retells the old Groucho Marx-cum-Sigmund Freud joke about not wanting to belong to a club of which he was made a member. Part of the *frisson* of the Allen-Keaton relationship was obviously derived from a self-conscious magnification of the tension between Jew and gentile. But there were deeper and stronger tensions as well between his intellect and her intuition, his morbidity and her eccentricity, his tortured personality and her furtive personality. The pairing is so ridiculously impossible that it becomes indescribably moving. It is moving in the way that Diane Keaton sings "It Had To Be You" and "Seems Like Old Times" in an unexpectedly sweet, high register, and a deliciously delayed tempo in which she almost just misses the beat before scooping down to pick it up as her eyes dart wildly and mischievously from behind her long hair. What is she looking at? The camera? Her ex-lover? The rest of us? Or are her eyes simply glazed over with crazy expectations? It is a strange spectacle, and in its strangeness is its conviction.

In years to come *Annie Hall* may be fondly remembered as the *Romeo and Juliet* of the analysts. Allen uses the most outrageously literal devices to distinguish the past from the present, the conscious from the unconscious, the physical from the spiritual, the id from the superego, the drama from the essay. He manages to be so boring on the subject of death that he makes Bergman seem light-hearted. Yet, the whole movie hangs together through the power of its reminiscence. Allen is beastly toward the women in his life before *Annie Hall*. The Louise Lasser character incarnated in Carol Kane has been reduced to a skimpy stereotype. Janet Margolin and Shelley Duvall play completely caricatured status-seekers. For one thing, they are too much in tune with the prevailing zeitgeist. *Annie Hall*, by contrast, had to take night courses to find out what zeitgeist meant, and as soon as she found out—and she had been prompted by her mentor to find out—she quickly thereafter wanted out. The mind had doomed the heart from the outset.

Of course, I could make *Annie Hall* seem funnier than it is by quoting all its one-liners out of context. Perhaps that is all that most people want from Allen. If so, Los Angeles alone has proved to be a gold mine for Allen's satiric talents, particularly when contrasted with supposedly dying New York. One can forgive Allen a great deal for loving New York as much as he does. One can forgive him almost anything for the cinematic valentine he has woven for Diane Keaton. I never dreamt that a Woody Allen movie would ever remind me of a Larry Hart lyric. After *Annie Hall*, it will be difficult to argue that romantic heterosexual love is not making a strong comeback.