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Author(s)	Kelly Vance
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The Allen Curse

THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO. Written and directed by Woody Allen. A Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe Production. Produced by Robert Greenhut. With Mia Farrow, Jeff Daniels, Danny Aiello, Irving Metzman, Stephanie Farrow, Dianne Wiest, Edward Herrmann, John Wood, Deborah Rush, Van Johnson, Zoe Caldwell, and Milo O'Shea. At the California.

By Kelly Vance

Jean Cocteau once praised his native French as one of the few languages in which it was possible to be witty without necessarily being funny. What was true for the poet/novelist/playwright turned film director (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Orpheus*, *Blood of a Poet*) might pro-



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vide a key to understanding what I call the Allen Curse, in which comedian/essayist/playwright turned film director Woody Allen is eternally compelled to tussle with critics and fans who misunderstand what he's trying to do. Evidently Woody Allen is tired of being funny. Apparently he'd enjoy nothing more than to write the brand of polished, sophisticated prose, in English, of course, to which Cocteau referred, without having to grovel for laughs from the gallery. Inasmuch as it's possible to continue comparing such disparate talents as Cocteau and Allen, it's plain that what Cocteau could do with ease is pretty much impossible for the di-

rector of *Sleeper*, *Annie Hall*, and *Broadway Danny Rose*. The Allen Curse lives on. The philistines are everywhere. Take the money and run, Woody.

I'll admit that my favorite part of the Woody Allen filmography is the beginning, when his nightclub-TV shtick was welded to his screen persona like protective, laugh-guaranteeing armor. No doubt as far as the latter-day auteur of *Stardust Memories* and *Zelig* is concerned, I'm happily installed in the cheap seats with the rest of the yobboes, watching *Bananas*, *Sleeper*, and *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* In those early pictures, the parodies of high art (including art films) proceeded from a hip comic's sure-footed point of view. The European art filmmaker heroes of the '50s—Fellini, Bergman, Eisenstein—were tweaked in

the classic undergrad manner, salted liberally with New York street smarts and Allen's own nebbish-with-a-hard-on character.

The trouble with Woody Allen began sometime around 1978's *Interiors*, when it appeared that parodying Ingmar Bergman wasn't enough, that somehow Allen wanted to be Bergman, creating a somber, closeup-filled mise-en-scene in which various "empty" family members spill the contents of their souls to the accompaniment of dour cello music. It was as if Mort Sahl had got drunk one night and decided to become Averell Harriman. Didn't Woody realize that on the level at which he was dealing with Bergman, that Bergman was a figure of fun, with his doom-laden dialogue and double-dip symbolism? *Interiors* turned out to be one of the

finest parodies Woody Allen ever made. Word is it wasn't intended that way, and the Allen Curse was uttered. From then on, a chorus of lowbrow reviewers, Allen fans who admired his emulation of Keaton (Buster, not Diane) yet drew the line at dead horses Bergman and Fellini, stopped going to Woody Allen movies blindly. The Woody Allen they once knew had become, in his public statements, a bitter man who disdained the light-hearted homages to serious subjects that had made him famous and now yearned to lay a few bricks in the walkway of the human condition himself. Enter *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, et al.

Stardust Memories was the bomb blast which cleared the air around Woody Allen. A black-and-white film heavily in the manner of Fel-

lini, it portrayed a director beset on all sides by an army of nagging fans with hilariously grotesque faces (homage to Joe Sedelmaier?) who all demanded to know the same thing: why aren't you funny anymore? Allen's 8½, ostensibly. Not even Charlie Chaplin, who really had justification for hard feelings, ever assaulted his meal ticket with such a vengeance. *Stardust Memories* separated, once and for all, Allen's true believers from the rest of the movie-going public. If they were going to follow Allen, with back issues of *The New Yorker* in hand, it was him they would follow, not Virgil Starkwell, nor Fielding Melish, nor Diane Keaton, nor the spirits of Roberto Rossellini or Bob Hope. And the tactic worked. *Stardust Memories* was so fascinatingly repulsive that it made Woody Allen the prince of the go-to-hell independent filmmakers. While he walked through the garden with the thoroughly revised-upon cinematic styles of European directors, his comedy audience drifted on to other things, leaving Allen free: free of excess ticketholders, but also free, in a critically academic way of speaking, to make the films he wanted without the burden of having to be funny.

The Purple Rose of Cairo is the third release for Allen in the last two years. Not only is he making them faster, he's making them shorter. *Zelig* ran under ninety minutes, *Broadway Danny Rose* was less than average feature length, and *Cairo* is about ninety minutes. Unfortunately, *Cairo's* one joke doesn't hold up as well as *Zelig's* one joke, and so ninety minutes

drags by at the slowest pace Allen has ever attempted.

The frail gag on which the film hangs is that for the pitiful character of Cecilia (Mia Farrow), a depression-era waitress who spends every night dreaming at her small-town movie house, celluloid fantasy is just as frustrating, maybe more so, as her drab life. Harped at by her boss and alternately threatened and ignored by her unemployed lout of a husband (Danny Aiello), Cecilia retreats into a swoony love affair with Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels), the lanky and vapid lead character in a light comedy, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, which Cecilia camps in front of, memorizing every detail of the fluffy plot. Then one night Tom, who plays both the film and the film-within-the-film in a pith helmet and explorer gear, steps out of the screen and approaches Cecilia. Seems he's amazed and impressed by her devotion to his image, and he's fallen in love with her. Despite the protests of the other characters in the comedy, who can't leave the screen and are unable to finish the picture without Tom, Tom and Cecilia leave the theater. The rest of the picture we're watching (ours is in color; theirs is b&w) details the extremely mild adventures of Cecilia and Tom as they try to figure a way to be happy together. The studio in Hollywood hears about the escape of one of its characters and sends a search party, including the actor who portrays Tom, to New Jersey to bring his creation back before he commits a crime. That would be poison on business. Most of the jokes are about that caliber. Tom is a fictional being, so when he takes Cecilia out to a restaurant and tries to pay with stage money, he honestly doesn't realize there's anything wrong.

Several directors have had much more fun with this concept. Two movies that made Woody Allen's film look superfluous are Herbert Ross's *Pennies From Heaven* (1981) and Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924). *Pennies* contains all the

pathos that Allen seems reluctant to delineate plus volumes more wit in the person of Steve Martin, who takes the leap along with the other characters into '30s musical numbers just when the action in the real world is at its most depressing. Keaton's amateur detective crosses the threshold of the screen to solve a crime and completely engrosses us in his excursion with hardly a look back to the real side, in which he's a projectionist who has fallen asleep on the job. Full of disorienting scene changes and some of Keaton's must breathtaking stunts, *Sherlock Jr.* says more using sight gags and pantomime than does Woody Allen's convoluted dialogue, which has the movie character Tom kiss the real-life Cecilia and then blurt out: "The fadeout? Why isn't there a fadeout?" Where Ross and Martin find profound irony and Keaton plunges into pure physical exhilaration, Allen and his diffident leads create only the most pedestrian of situations from the sudden mixup of two parallel spheres. The notion of escape, so vital to the spirits of both Ross's and Keaton's films, is sketched in so hastily and weakly in *Cairo* that, when Cecilia's bubble finally bursts, it's possible to

imagine her wheeling directly around in the theater and using another movie to forget the incident. Cecilia's predicament is disposable.

The one brief scene in which *The Purple Rose of Cairo* catches a bit of interpersonal magic is when Tom is taken by a passing prostitute (played with a Thelma Ritter hard-as-nails attitude by Dianne Wiest) to her bordello and so charms the assembled whores that they offer him a party on the house. He of course refuses. It's not written into his character to be lustful or to even know what a whorehouse is. But he turns the ladies down so gracefully that it prompts one of them to ask: "Are there any more guys out there like you?" That's the best line in the picture, buried deep in context and spoken by a bit player. As if to point up his absence from the cast, Allen has forced the lead players into such watery performances that the screen-bound actors of the "imaginary" Manhattan comedy threaten again and again to steal their thunder with only the briefest of appearances. Edward Herrmann and Zoe Caldwell, in particular, we wouldn't mind following instead of Daniels, who seems to be doing his

best with two awkwardly written parts, and Farrow, whose job is to subsume just about every sign of life except awestruck rapture, and that only for a few minutes when her dream lover appears in the middle of her sixth viewing of his vehicle. In all fairness, the special effects here, when Tom comes off the screen, are better than Buster Keaton's. So much for the cinematic achievements of sixty years.

Looking forward to *Hannah and Her Sisters*, which is due later this year, in his new fast-paced produc-

tion and release schedule, one can only hope that Woody Allen has stayed in better touch with his muse than he has with his audience. Allen Curse or no, Woody Allen is one of the most consistently interesting writers working his side of the street. If we could only be sure just which side of the street that was, mirthless melodies like *The Purple Rose of Cairo* wouldn't be so disheartening to those of us who have come to anticipate a certain modicum of style from Allen. *Cairo* is a waste of time.