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## FILM

## Hecksapoppin'

By J. Hoberman *Village Voice* 3/12/85

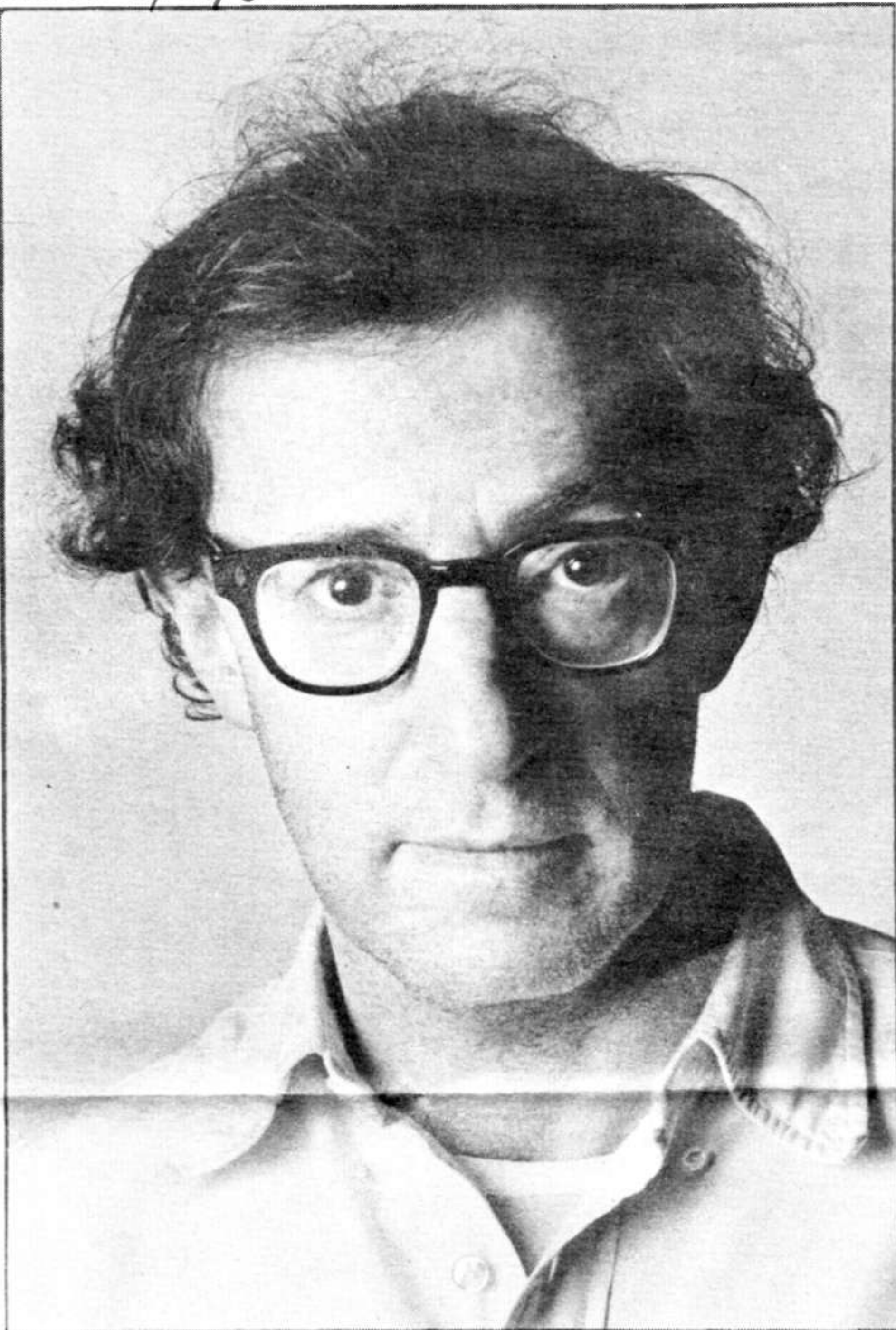
**THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO.** Directed and written by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Released by Orion Pictures. At the Beekman.

You may be seized by a sense of dread when Fred Astaire's version of "Cheek to Cheek" comes wafting over the ascetic Ingmar Bergman-style credits: The mass culture of the Great Depression is being dignified, mythologized yet again. Woody Allen is scarcely the least ambitious of American directors, so forewarned is forearmed. With its reverential take on the movies (and the "little guy," in this case, girl), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is something like Allen's *Pennies from Heaven*—a meditation on just what it was the movies gave us to go on.

Since the film's strongest elements are the surprise aspects of its charming special effects, one feels almost churlish giving the plot away. Still, it's impossible that anyone will remain inoculated against the story for long—you'd need the innocence of lead Mia Farrow for that. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* combines the self-conscious movie magic of *Zelig* with the anecdotal wistfulness of *Broadway Danny Rose* (which, despite its weak ending, is surely Allen's best film since *Annie Hall*); its premise was anticipated by his short story, "The Kugelmass Episode." Like creatures in a Jean Cocteau fantasy, *The Purple Rose*'s principals inhabit two astral planes—passing back and forth between an RKO programmer called *The Purple Rose of Cairo* on the silver screen and the ostensible real world that encompasses it.

Clever but thin, *The Purple Rose* is closer to *Hellzapoppin'* than *Tristram Shandy*, but ultimately it's not as good as that, either: Allen lacks the vulgar exuberance of the Olson and Johnson hall of mirrors, he has an itch to sanctify everything with Walker Evans grit. Set in a grim New Jersey factory town circa 1932, *The Purple Rose* celebrates the ready-made fantasy life and pathetic actuality of Mia Farrow, a timid hash-slinger married to an unemployed brute played by Danny Aiello. Farrow is the ultimate '30s movie fan. A virtual junkie, she sees pictures again and again, memorizes the dialogue, daydreams about them on her job, does everything but moon over a photo of Clark Gable and warble "You Are My Lucky Star." As hers is evidently a one-bijou town, she lives for the day when the bill changes. Entering the theater to see *The Purple Rose of Cairo* for the first time, Farrow lights up like an incandescent lamp—it's as though she were inverted by Louis B. Mayer to justify giving him the Nobel Peace Prize.

Painstaking as Allen is, it's remarkable how some things just can't be duplicated. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (the movie within the movie) looks right but the pacing is off—only Ed Herrmann, playing a Gotham swell, seems to know how to present himself with crisp period brashness. The film's hero, Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels), is a depression version of Indiana Jones—a naive goofball Herrman and his snooty ladyfriend discover in an Egyptian tomb—wearing his pith helmet from Broadway nightclub to Park Avenue penthouse and then, moved by Farrow's rapt adoration, into the wilds of New Jersey. (After Baxter leaves the film, the other characters push their noses against the screen and start squabbling with the spectators. "What the hell kind of movie is this?" one of Allen's patented Jewish couples begins to kvetch. For Woody, life is a spectacle watched by a perpetual



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Borscht Belt audience.)

*The Purple Rose of Cairo* is only the second feature Allen has directed without appearing in it, and Farrow is clearly his alter ego. She has the Woody Allen lines and whine down to a science. ("You kiss perfectly," Farrow exclaims after being kissed by Baxter. "It's what I've always dreamed kissing could be.") But she's not permitted his bleak sense of humor, and her character soon grows tiresome. A splendid bimbo in *Broadway Danny Rose*, Mia is here far too dear a waif—so unworldly she makes Lillian Gish seem like a Joan Collins swinger. Farrow is purely a victim, and the bombastic scenes

where she's bullied by the hulking Aiello aren't just unfunny, they're actually unpleasant.

With Farrow thus a vaguely guilt-inducing presence, Allen milks his finest gags out of Baxter's engaging inability to cope with the real world: When he and Mia go dancing, the movie character blithely pays the tab with stage money. And when Farrow later enters the movie-within-the-movie, the same sort of partial illusion exists ("Tom, I don't know what they're charging you, but these champagne bottles are filled with ginger ale"). Baxter's best scene, however, is at the local brothel. Picked up by a hooker as he

waits for Farrow by the abandoned amusement park, he innocently entertains her colleagues by telling them how he stands "in awe of existence," ranting about the miracle of giving birth or smelling a rose.

Delightfully, the girls are so taken with his cornball enthusiasm they're prepared to treat him to a party, but, true to his '30s movie hero persona, Baxter can only think about Mia. "Are there any other guys out there like you?" one tart wonders wistfully, and the joke's not simply that she doesn't link this sappy paradigm to the movies but how the scene shifts its emphasis from male fantasy to female. Pace Sigmund Freud, Allen's strongest insight is into what women want—and why it doesn't exist. "I've met the most wonderful man," Farrow sighs. "Of course, he's fictional—but you can't have everything."

Dialectics proliferate and the plot thickens when Mia finally has to choose between the character and the actor who plays him. His career on the line, ambitious contract-player Gil Shepherd appears in town to try to coerce his creation back to the screen. "I fleshed him out," Shepherd tells Farrow of Baxter. "You did a wonderful job—he's adorable," she replies. Still, competing against his own idealized image, Shepherd is able to enlist Mia's support. (He's a nicer version of her simian husband; she's a veteran of accepting coercion.) In opting for the real world, just like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Farrow sets herself up to be, as Manuel Puig put it, betrayed by Rita Hayworth.

In *Play It Again, Sam*, the movies served Woody as a model for life. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the movies serve Farrow as her compensatory fantasy. There's a sense in which *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is a tribute to Hollywood—but it's an insincere one at heart. Farrow's reverent expression as she reimmers herself in a film at fade-out is reminiscent of John Hurt's glazed stupor at the end of 1984. Allen, who if nothing else has redefined the nature of screen stardom to encompass himself, has left his leading lady stranded in Room 101.

JAMES HAMILTON