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Banana Peels in the Underbrush: Woody's back and Mia's got him, sort of.

## FILMS IN FOCUS

# Woody's Walpurgisnacht

Village Voice 7/20/82

By Andrew Sarris

**A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S SEX COMEDY.** Directed and written by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut and executive-produced by Charles H. Joffe. A Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe production for Orion Pictures, released through Warner Bros.

If *Stardust Memories* represented the winter of Woody Allen's discontent, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* may mark his summer of rejuvenation. Mia Farrow is now the New Woman of his dreams and fantasies, but otherwise nothing is much changed in the somewhat literally magical world of Woody Allen. For example, guilt without sex still has a big edge over sex without guilt. In a fanciful realm haunted by the pagan permissiveness of Shakespeare, Mendelssohn, and the Ingmar Bergman of *Smiles of a Summer Night*, Allen and his players manage to kvetch more than they carouse. To some this may demonstrate once more that it is easier to get the boy out of Brooklyn than Brooklyn out of the boy. Yet it may be a mistake to limit this film to the boundaries of autobiographical allegory. Ever since *Manhattan*, and to a certain extent even in *Manhattan*, Allen has been trying to get out from under his skin. He has been working hard at being more an actor and less an alter ego, and he has become ever more obsessed as a writer with the complex interplay of images and ideas. He has temporarily retreated from the unsullied solemnity of *Interiors*, with the result that much as his characters may gambol through the woods, the banana peel of parody is always lurking in the underbrush. Similarly, such Jungian enterprises as the magic acts (certifiably autobiographical) in his play *The Floating Light Bulb* and his infernal flying machines and magic lanterns in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* may add new dimensions of mystical aspiration to his persona, but Freudian accountability keeps popping up with such inevitable consequences as embarrassment and failure. For his "fans" in *Stardust Memories* with their avowed preference for his earlier, funnier, pre-Bergmanesque movies like *Bananas*, the renewal of a certain level of jocularity in

*Sex Comedy* may serve as the occasion for a few reminiscent, appreciative chuckles. Woody's back, and Mia's got him, but not quite.

Actually, my first impression of *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* was derived from still photographs in local theaters. Despite the ostentatious secrecy surrounding the project, it was generally known that Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* was supposed to be the model. The stills suggested a spoof remake might be in the works. Again, not quite. The period is 1900, perhaps a little earlier or a little later. Allen indulges in the kind of casual pastness in which the gents' and ladies' underwear seems to have been more carefully researched than the dialogue and manners.

There are three couples instead of the four in the Bergman, and there are no servants in Allen's version. Allen himself plays Andrew, a Wall Street investor by vocation, and a crackpot inventor by inclination. He is married to Adrian (Mary Steenburgen), and having a rotten sex life in their summer house in the woods, where Adrian's cousin Leopold (Jose Ferrer) is coming on a weekend visit with his bride-to-be, a free-thinking, frizzy-haired sprite named Ariel (Mia Farrow), with whom Andrew once had a romantic but, alas, platonic fling before he married Adrian. The third couple is made up of Maxwell (Tony Roberts), a womanizing doctor, and his nubile nurse Dulcy (Julie Hagerty). Wall Street and medicine are good for some anachronistic one-liners to the repeated effect that all brokers are crooks and all doctors quacks, but there is no effort on Allen's part to develop any social portraiture even on the rudimentary level of Bergman's in *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Allen is actually about the last person you'd ever expect to work on Wall Street. Jose Ferrer's Leopold is a considerably more ambitious conception, in that Leopold comes to serve the function of Gunnar Björnstrand's gallery of befuddled rationalists in Bergman's works. The film opens with Leopold's harangue to his students on the evils of metaphysics in

philosophy. Leopold is a passionate pragmatist. The "university" in which he teaches philosophy seems more European and less American than the rest of the film, and there are no unifying camera movements as there are in Bergman's *Smiles* to integrate the milieu.

What happens? Not all that much, really. Andrew resumes his fling with Ariel, with whom Maxwell has become infatuated. Leopold has one last-gasp sexual awakening in the ministering arms of Dulcy, who has time to instruct inhibited Adrian on the way to fulfill her husband's sexual needs. Andrew learns belatedly that Maxwell had recently made love to Adrian. Adrian is jealous of Andrew's past with Ariel. Andrew has devised a magic lantern of sorts, and some of Gordon Willis's more whimsical point-of-view shots are ostensibly taken from Andrew's primitive flying machines. There are missed meetings, bouts of coitus interruptus, failed suicides, strange dreams, an ecstatic death, and finally a benign ghostliness. What started out as *Smiles of a Summer Night* ends up as *Blithe Spirit*, but still again,

not quite. *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* is not sour like *Stardust Memories*; it is too slight and cerebral for that. Still, it is pinched and paltry in the manner of a conceit that has not fully taken wing. Try as he may, Allen seems completely incapable of either Bergman's lyricism or his sensuality. The fault is not with Allen's actresses, Mia Farrow, particularly, being more dazzling than I can recall from any of her previous screen incarnations. The fault is in a wizened wistfulness communicated by Allen himself. He has been to the well of regretful remembrance much too often. Hence, his invocation of a magical fantasy ending for his film is much too facile in terms of his lack of development of character and his lack of resolution of relationships.

At a time when so few grown-up films are being undertaken, I hesitate to be even mildly critical of Woody Allen. Yet if, as he suggested in *Stardust Memories*, he identified more with Zeus than with Narcissus, he has clearly not hurled any thunderbolts on this occasion. At best, *Sex Comedy* is a pleasant diversion from the increasingly infantile popular mechanics now so much in vogue on the silver screen. Curiously, however, Allen seems right at home in the pseudo-spiritual domains of *E.T.* and *Tron* with their pop-theological pronouncements. I am beginning to wonder, a bit sadly to be sure, if I have left Allen permanently at the *Manhattan* transfer.

Wimbledon postscript: the NBC coverage of Wimbledon hit new lows on the last days of its coverage. Six games of the men's doubles finals in progress were sacrificed to zillions of commercials and needless replays of matches already seen. The announcing was excessive and unisightful as usual, the innumerable cutaways to spectators in the stands even more obtrusive than usual. Otherwise, Wimbledon was saved from numbing anticlimax by the women players, particularly the indomitable Billie Jean King, the disconcertingly tentative Chris Evert Lloyd, and the masterly Martina Navratilova. The Connors-McEnroe final, by contrast, was more mysterious psychodrama than top-flight tennis. For the longest time it seemed that Connors couldn't win, but that McEnroe didn't want to win. I was happy for Connors in a twilight kind of way. My own fledgling tennis late in life was brought up on Connors and his T-2000 (now the T-4000). Whether McEnroe wins or loses, however, I must continue to worship his extraordinary volley, since I am such a pathetic volleyer myself. All right, Bud, you have one whole year to clean up your act before the next Wimbledon. ■



No Thunderbolts: Jose Ferrer has Julie Hagerty, briefly.