

**On Woody Allen**  
By Miranda Yaver

When I was seven, I watched *Sleeper* for the first time (at my mother's suggestion) and called her at work eagerly on the phone to report to her how funny it was.

"I know, honey, I've seen it," she replied.

"But you'll *really* get it this time," I said with the certainty of one who felt some strange need to experience things for the first time with those around me. If I hadn't gotten a joke before, no one had. If I knew something to be funny, others would come around. Perhaps it was my early introduction to *Harold and Maude*, and my immediate desire to become Maude, who upon being told by a priest that he didn't appreciate her painting the church statues, replied supportively, "Don't be too discouraged. For aesthetic appreciation, always a little time."

But back to Woody Allen. His films often feel like love letters to all the things I care most about in this world. I was raised by Annie Hall.<sup>1</sup> I love e.e. cummings and Manhattan and Van Gogh, and if I could disappear into any "golden age," it would be Paris in the 1920s, amid the masculine genius of Ernest Hemingway, who taught me grace under pressure and who in a world almost guaranteed to break our hearts twelve ways to Sunday, reminds us that "the world breaks everyone, and afterward some are strong at the broken places." *Love and Death* may not have initiated my teenage existential angst, but it certainly perpetuated it as I went on to read Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, no doubt a strong influence of the philosophical debates in which he and Diane Keaton engage – the subjectivity of immorality, the objectivity of subjectivity, in the thing itself, of the thing itself, the rational scheme of perception. It fascinated me, consumed me. (Now in my late twenties and rewatching *Sleeper*, my main remaining question is mankind's failure to invent the orb).

He is not without controversy, and yet my affection for his genius is unabashed, perhaps *because* of its raw honesty about the neurosis of the human condition and the desire to escape to a Cole Porter performance or the pages of *Madame Bovary*, while still able to master the silliness of such lines as, "Don't get me wrong, I love him like a brother, just not one of mine."

In a sense, each of his characters represents a stage through which each of us goes. Alan Felix, a film critic, lives a life of fantasy alongside the legendary Humphrey Bogart, who endows him with macho sex and dating advice ("nothing a whiskey and soda couldn't fix") as he comes to grips with being left by his wife and fearing, "I'm 29. The height of my sexual potency was ten years ago!" In the end, he finds, everyone is Bogie at certain times when we have the courage to look within ourselves.

*Love and Death*. Boris, an existential lover-not-fighter in love with Keaton (a familiar theme), who marries him only with the expectation of his losing a life-or-death duel. It retains its freshness forty years after its release, viewing after viewing, and appeals to that core, urgent sense of needing to have a purpose and to know what that precise purpose is. It is only with the fellow Woody Allen fiend with whom I can say knowingly, "Did you say, 'wheat'?"

Alvy Singer represents the all-too-true heartbreak of being truly and honestly in love and, despite being perfect for one another in most ways, being unable to make it work in the end. And then months or years later in New York, which truly is America's largest small town given the number of unexpected (sometimes unwanted) run-ins, they reconnect and for that moment remember why those years were spent together, even if years will pass before the next run-in at

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I too have been known to awaken a roommate at odd hours due to the presence of a pest.

the local coffee shop, or in their case a showing of *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Though their breakup and Alvy's reminiscing through scenes of their relationship – of walks along the pier and the famous lobster scene – are to the sounds of Keaton's rendition of "Seems Like Old Times," it could just as well be to Dylan – "Goodbye's too good a word babe, so I'll just say fare thee well," the characters at once disheartened though accepting of their fate to be apart, and Alvy still rewriting for the stage the scenes that didn't play out as planned in real life. And yet as he speaks directly to the camera, it is with a great sense of honesty, and watching the film for the 100<sup>th</sup> time but for the first time in New York City along with other avid fans anticipating every line they already knew by heart, and on the heels of a breakup myself, their unhappy ending felt all the more unfair.<sup>2</sup>

Mickey Sachs, on the far side of middle-aged, is coming to grips with his faith, or perhaps more accurately lack thereof, along with navigating the now more rugged waters of relationships and children. A hypochondriac at his core, and now faced with the possibility of a brain tumor, he is forced to contemplate his place in the world and the meaning that it holds for him. He buys white bread and mayonnaise (and offers to dye Easter eggs if it helps) and gets books on the krishnas, and resolves that if Nietzsche is right that we relive our lives repeatedly as-is, it won't be worth it if he must sit through the ice capades again. It is ultimately the woman into whom he runs at the record store (his former sister-in-law – yes, a little dose of Woody Allen inappropriateness) – one date ended with, "I had a great time. It was like the Nuremberg trials," and the next ended with, "It's lucky I ran into you" – that he finds his long-awaited solace and satisfaction.

And in 2011, the spectacular *Midnight in Paris*, in which Allen himself is absent from the screen but present in every word uttered by Owen Wilson's character, Gil Pender. The film is framed around the notion of golden age fallacy, the romanticizing of other, earlier worlds as greater than one's own. Among the great artists, writers, and musicians of Paris in the twenties – and without so much as the blink of an eye from the surrealists – Gill disappears and thrives and falls in love despite his 21<sup>st</sup> century fiancée. He learns through these time travels of the golden ages about which these people fantasize, and decides to remain in his 21<sup>st</sup> century reality rather than continuing to indulge his fantasy life.

Apart from the obvious philosophizing and neurosis, a common thread in Allen's work – including also *The Purple Rose of Cairo* – is the challenges (and occasional triumphs) of getting gotten by the right people at the right time. He does not offer solutions, and sometimes leaves us with the bleak sense of longing and the heartbreak of Mia Farrow realizing the departure of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* from the local theater and with it the actor and its lead character, a sense of hopelessness (hence, *Without Feathers*), or else the humorous conclusion that only believes in sex and death ("two things that come once in a lifetime, but at least after death, you're not nauseous"). But his literary gift, his understanding of women, and his philosophizing about the greater questions leave us often with an honest portrait of what it feels like to feel alone in a city of millions, and in a world sometimes fraught with hurt and disappointment, to truly yearn.

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<sup>22</sup> Due to subway delays, I arrived to the showing ten minutes late. True to form as an *Annie Hall* Fan, I took a two-hour coffee break so as not to arrive "in the middle" and caught the next showing.