



Woody Allen

FEELS A SONG COMING ON

Shrugging off the controversy over his private life, Woody Allen proves with his latest movie that none of his film-making skills have deserted him.

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Woody Allen was once asked whether he thought sex was squalid. "Yes, but only if it is done properly," he replied. It is unlikely that he would give the same answer today. Manhattan society's favourite filmmaker is again in the news not only because of his latest movie, Everyone ▶

Says I Love You, but also because his former partner Mia Farrow has just published a book in which she discloses embarrassing details of their 12-year relationship.

In "What Falls Away: A Memoir", Farrow accuses Allen of, among other things, having intimately touched their adopted daughter Dylan. She also describes how she found pornographic photographs that Allen had taken of Soon-Yi, the daughter that she adopted together with André Previn. Allen and Soon-Yi are now living together and frequently appear together in public. The book also contains the full text of the State Supreme Court's decision in the child custody case.

Woody Allen denies that what the media and public think about the scandal bothers him. It certainly has done nothing to slow down his pace of work. If anything, he has been working even more intensively since he split up with Farrow in 1992. The films that he has made in the intervening years are among his best to date: *Husbands and Wives*, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, *Bullets Over Broadway* and *Mighty Aphrodite*.

The latest film is not particularly autobiographical – he already took up the theme of a relationship between an older man and a much younger woman in *Manhattan* ('79) and *Husbands and Wives* ('92). *Everyone Says I Love You* is about love and all kinds of romantic entanglements. It marks Woody Allen's debut not only as a musical director, but also as a singer and dancer. He may lack the nimble feet of a Fred Astaire and his singing voice is low, to say the least, but his humorous script breathes new life into the musical, a genre that for the past 15 years has looked like it was dying out in Hollywood.

Music is an important factor in many of Allen's films. He is a gifted jazz clarinetist and sometimes performs in Michael's Pub in Manhattan.

"Music is a big thing for me," he explains. "But not just the music I play, which is a very specific thing and a hobby. When I grew up the music that surrounded me was great. You could just turn on the radio and the music that you would hear while brushing your teeth before going to school was by people like Benny Goodman, Porter, Gershwin, Billie Holliday and Frank Sinatra. All these people have gone on to become art icons in music. Without thinking, it becomes part of your life." In *Radio Days* ('87) he highlighted the central role of "steam radio" in people's homes before TV took over.

With a budget of over \$20 million, *Everyone Says I Love You* is an expensive film by Woody Allen's standards, but he is not complaining. "The film was a complete self-indulgence. We filmed in New York, Paris and Venice – all places that I love. Everything that I wanted to do I was able to do in the movie." The plot is fairly thin and the characters are easily recognisable, indeed bordering on caricatures. Woody Allen plays Joe, a writer who has settled in Paris. From time to time he visits his daughter and his ex-wife, the "charity queen" Steffi (Goldie Hawn), who belongs to Manhattan's liberal-minded *crème de la crème* and is remarried to wealthy Bob (Alan Alda). But all of her children from two marriages have love troubles and their soured relationships blight the atmosphere. Joe manages to seduce a stunningly beautiful art expert (Julia Roberts), but only because, via her psychiatrist, he has stumbled across information about her innermost dreams. The message seem to be that the man/woman of one's dreams is not necessarily the ideal partner.

The choreography is simple, but very effective and there are many humorous digs at classical musicals. The large-scale production numbers include a scene with dancing ghosts in a funeral home and a French version of "Hooray For Captain Spaulding" with everybody dressed up like Groucho Marx. Goldie Hawn literally floats along the



Scenes from *Everyone Says I Love You*: Alan Alda, Goldie Hawn, Allen and Natasha Lyonne. "I wanted to do a musical for people that couldn't sing and dance," claims the director.

"Everything I wanted to do I was able to do in the movie"

wanted a song that continued the plot along." Allen knows his musicals and prefers '50s classics from *Singing in the Rain*, *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *An American in Paris* to the Astaire-Rogers '30s ones. "The kind of cliché thinking got around in Hollywood that musicals

Left Bank of the Seine in Paris in a romantic pas-de-deux. Woody himself sings "I'm Thru With Love" with intimate intensity.

"The singing is completely new for me," he says. "I wanted to do a musical for people that couldn't sing and dance. I didn't want trained voices that were completely cold and technical. I wanted people to sing and dance like my mother and father. They had to be vulnerable, where they couldn't sing, but still sing with feeling as best they could."

Goldie Hawn and Alan Alda were the only members of the cast who had been in a musical before.

"When I cast the actors I didn't care how they sang. Once I found out that they could act and they were correct for the part then I cast them. A few weeks later we told them they had to sing. It came as a surprise but everybody agreed to do it. Only Drew Barrymore said that her voice was so abysmal that she wanted someone else to sing for her. I didn't want to lose her, so I hired a schoolgirl who had no professional singing credits to record her song."

Allen used well-established songs, but some of the interpretations are rather odd: for example, "Cuddle Up A Little Closer" is sung in Hindi. He wrote the dialogue first and then picked melodies to suit it.

"I didn't want to stop and just do a song," he explains. "I

are out of style or something. But they never were," he says. "If somebody made *My Fair Lady* tomorrow for the first time, everybody would run to see it and think it was delightful."

His plans for the future include getting together with a composer to write a musical with completely new music, but is concerned that the musical tradition is no longer so lively in the USA. "If this was years ago, there would have been at least 15 people that you could have asked to write the music and it would have been superb," he says.

Allen keeps up a frantic pace of work. Since he made his directing debut with *Take the Money and Run* in 1969, he has made a new film nearly every year. But he denies that it takes much discipline. "I wake up at 6.30 every morning. I do my physical exercises, have breakfast, get dressed and then I start working. That doesn't require discipline because I like to do it. But the tendency is to go on all night and it does take discipline to put the work aside." He still types all his scripts using the Olympus typewriter that he bought when he was 16. "I don't need a word processor," he says. "I can type fast. I change a lot but then I cross it out and retype and cut it out with scissors and glue."

Whenever an idea strikes him he immediately writes it down on everything from theatre programmes to table napkins. All the scraps of paper and other material are kept in a drawer. Before he starts a new manuscript, he spreads them all out in front of him on the floor.

"Some of the ideas are so terrible when I look at them again. And I wonder what I thought was funny about it. Why was I so enthused to grab a napkin and write this down? But some things do hold up."

Being able to cast the right actors in the right roles is one of Woody Allen's most consistent qualities. He is a typical "actor's director", who rarely gives specific directions. Instead, the actors have a lot of freedom to improvise. They are only allowed to read the scenes they are in, and rehearsal is a real no-no.

"Usually I tell the actor: 'this is the dialogue, you can use as much or as little of it as you want.' I just tell them what I want to get out of the scene."

In an Allen film the stars work for the same money as the nobodies. There are no exceptions to the rule.

"We try and cast whoever is right for the part. If it happens to be a huge star we try and get the person. Sometimes I hear that some great actor, say Dustin Hoffman, very much wants to work in my movies. He'll call me up and say: 'I don't care about the money,' I tell him it's fine, write him a part and call him up one year later or so. But by now he's got six movies to do. He



Drew Barrymore and Tim Roth complete Allen's star-studded cast.

Allen's actors have plenty of freedom to improvise

says: 'I can do it, in 2005.' That sort of thing happens quite a lot."

Besides scriptwriting and directing, he often acts in his own films as well, sometimes a little reluctantly. "I finished a film recently called *Deconstructing Harry* and it was very hard to get somebody to play Harry. I tried Robert de Niro and Dustin Hoffman and Elliot Gould but they had other obligations, wanted too much money or were tied up in a theatre show. So finally I did the part, but I didn't want to do it."

Everyone Says I Love You is Woody Allen's 26th film, but he says directing has not become any easier.

"You learn a tiny bit of technique but that everybody can learn within two weeks. Every project brings with it so many problems, unforeseen things. It's like a first time all the time. The director is always in the dark and scared and never knows what he is doing. Any director that tells you differently is not telling the truth. You really don't get any better."

He is a great admirer of Ingmar Bergman, whom he calls "the world's best entertainer". Yet his gloomiest, Bergman-inspired films, like *Interiors* and *Another Woman*, are among his least successful. In recent years he has made only comedies, but say it is just a coincidence. "I had comic ideas, but if tomorrow I had a very serious and grim idea and I thought it was good, I would do it," he says.

He devotes most of his time to his own film projects, but last year took a part in a TV production of Neil Simon's classic comedy *The Sunshine Boys*.

"I did it because they offered a huge amount of money – more than I make in my films – to work for four weeks only, right near my house. I couldn't resist and on top of that it was a Neil Simon play," he explains.

He had his first major success in the '50s as a comedy writer for the legendary Sid Caesar. Neil Simon's brother Barney and Mel Brooks were his colleagues on the sketch-writing team.

Woody Allen has rarely given interviews in the past, but as his film budgets get bigger the studios demand more publicity. During this interview he is relaxed and in good humour. He says he is happy and that it may have something to do with the fact that he is not currently receiving psychiatric therapy, which he has been doing for 40 years. Part of his therapy has always been to keep his nose to the grindstone and work on his next film. "I am now 61, but I feel completely energetic and healthy. Hopefully I can keep working for a long time. My father is 97 and my mother 90," he says.

That is the only personal information he reveals. His private life is not touched on during the conversation.

The real-life soap opera story is being kept alive by Mia Farrow, who depicts Woody Allen as a selfish and troubled man. According to her, he is nothing like the "loveable nebbish" on the screen, "endlessly and hilariously whining and quacking, questioning moral and philosophical issues, great and small".

She also claims that at the beginning of their relationship he told her that he had "zero interest in kids". Then came his, as she puts it, "bad touching" of their adoptive daughter Dylan. Her allegations of sex abuse were not borne out, but Woody Allen now has very limited access to Satchel, his son with Farrow.

The picture she paints of him in "What Falls Away" is clearly unsympathetic, but it is also obvious that she has her own axe to grind. Allen can only hope that the negative publicity that the book is generating will not mar the release of *Everyone Says I Love You*.

If Woody Allen really finds the concept of psychotherapy and analysis funny and Freud "amusing" it is quite conceivable that he will one day create a hilarious comedy based on his relationship with Mia Farrow.