

THE PROBLEM WITH ALLEN: SCOOP

"C'est merveilleux ! C'est merveilleux ! Woody Allen est le génie du cinéma américain!"

I wouldn't swear that the above sentence is exactly what the Parisian woman behind me exclaimed at the end of *Scoop*, a movie I thought was barely even good, much less marvelous, but it's pretty damn close.

Our difference of opinion was not exactly unexpected. I have never been that much of an Allen fan, and I've never really understood why during the past ten years most of his films have been graded on a pass/fail system, where pass equals masterpiece. For going on a decade, any Woody Allen film that is not despicable is greeted with more fanfare than other filmmaker's triumphs. And if the film happens to broach a subject that most decent people feel should be taken seriously (unpunished murder, god's abandonment of world, re: *Crimes and Mis—I mean Match Point*), it's greeted as the second coming of a reluctant Messiah, even if it's nothing but a watered-down version of his best work.

Allen isn't totally immune to the bad review, but even his worst reviews are filled with hope for his future films. It's hard to distinguish them from fan letters to the Woody Allen of *Annie Hall*.

To the true believers, even the small amount of agnosticism expressed by the occasional bad review is blasphemous. No matter how bad the film is, Parisians exclaim, *C'est merveilleux!*, and the films sell out for weeks, not days, weeks on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. These two places are the adoring wife Allen has always wanted.

We should all have it so good.

Or should we? The passion of Allen's fan has created a problem: his greatest works are shelved alongside his failures, and they look so much alike that is hard to tell the difference between them.

It's been easy for people to fall in love with Allen the director because it's easy to fall in love with Woody the actor. There he is in *Scoop*, that old familiar face, the lovable funny Jew skewering Waspish ways (or in this case those of the upper class in London), while simultaneously falling in love with their most beautiful women. He's funny. He's comfortable, and like Paris and the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he's completely, totally mad about the movies.

And herein lies the problem Woody the actor creates for Allen the director—the very same traits that make him a likable screen presence have also turned his movies into little more than glorifications of the films that came before them (including his own). That which is familiar becomes very dull indeed.

Compare Allen to the recently deceased Altman. Like Allen, Altman worked for years right outside the Hollywood system always struggling to get his pet projects made. Like Allen, Altman used a company of actors, all of whom swore by him as a director.

But Altman does not inspire the same kind of passionate love that Allen does. His fans never get the sense that he belongs to them. His movies contain too many characters, too many stories, and too many ideas to ever illuminate who he is or what he believes. The Altman fan never takes it for granted that the director is his friend because he always gets the sense that Altman could care less about him. Hell, he barely even cared if you could hear his dialogue.

Allen has always had a group of fans who loved him no matter what he did, who, in fact, seemed to love him even more when he fell out of favor with everyone else. As a result, he never had to completely drop out of sight the way Altman did. His fans loved him enough to keep him alive (or at least not directing television), and he never betrayed them. But they are the creative albatross that hangs around his neck. It may have been harder for Altman to make movies, but when he did, he was free to twist the conventions of Hollywood inside out and throw them against a wall to see if they would stick.

Altman was free to make films about the worlds that interested him irrespective of whether they would make good films. He lived by the basic code of "you never know until you try" and one of the most frustrating facts of life for those of us who would follow him to the ends of the earth is that he never failed in a way that was familiar. There are moments in bad Woody Allen films that remind you of his previous triumphs, but there are no comfort zones in a bad Altman film--which is his greatest strength as a filmmaker. Some of Altman's films may be terrifyingly bad, but they are almost always haunting. *Three Women* may be practically impenetrable in its obtuseness, but I had nightmares about it for days. Most bad Woody Allen films evaporate the moment you leave the theater.

And in the end, to be an Altman fan means that you can stay up all night wondering whether Altman included the specter of death in *Prairie Home Companion* as a tribute to Garrison Keilor or whether he was just too sick to say no, without detracting from the fact that *Nashville* may be the greatest film ever made about the cynicism that propels the American dream.