Film Feature: The Top 10 Underrated Woody Allen Films

Submitted by BrianTT [1] on June 27, 2012 - 1:57pm

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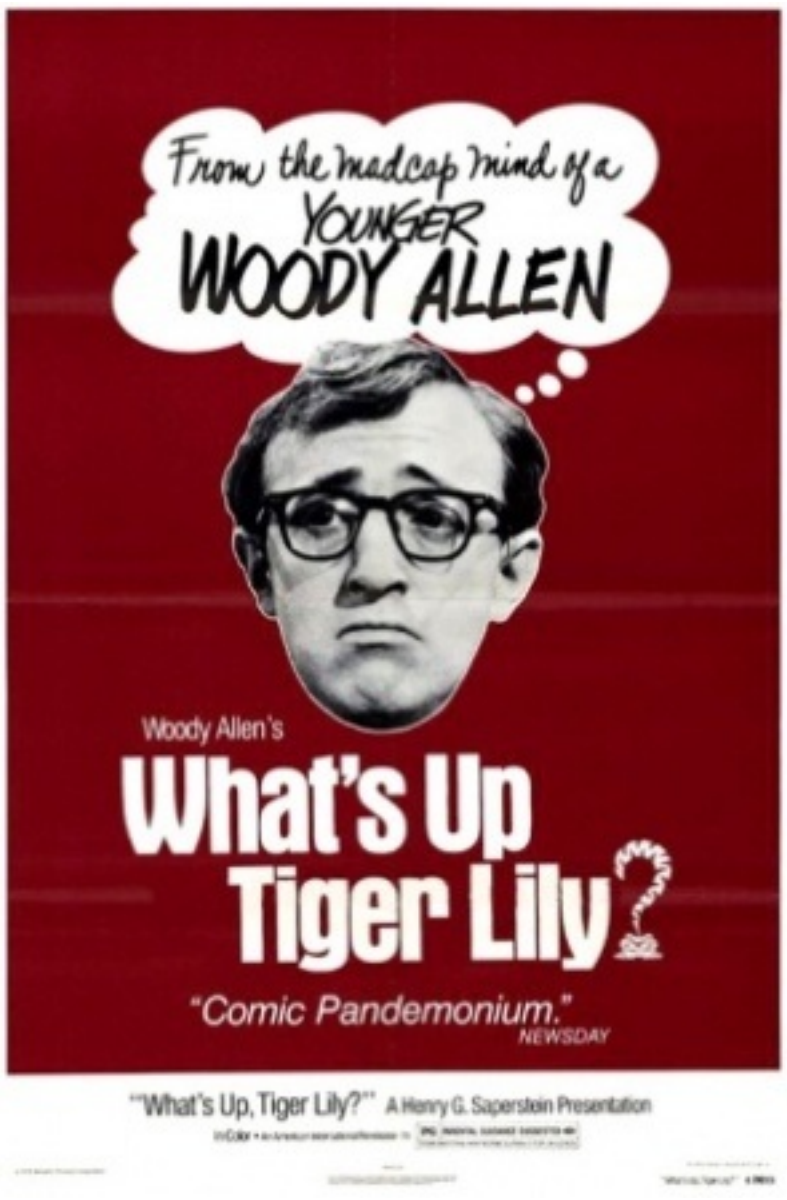
CHICAGO – Just as Groucho Marx refused to join any club that would have him as a member, Woody Allen would most likely turn down any invite from an adoring fan club. He's repeatedly voiced his belief that he doesn't have a high regard for his own work, and recently told documentarian Robert B. Weide that he could live a life devoid of cinema as long as there was a sports team to follow. This may sound like a curious statement from a filmmaker who averages one picture a year, but it speaks to the compulsory spirit of a man trapped within the boundaries of his perfectionism. He can't bear watching his own films once they're completed because all he sees are the flaws.

As a longtime admirer of Allen's work, I've been able to savor the sublime moments in even his most problematic pictures, and have found that he has made far more good films than bad ones. Last year's surprise box office hit, "Midnight in Paris," has inspired some moviegoers to explore Allen's career for the first time. His best known masterpieces—"Annie Hall," "Manhattan," "Hannah and Her Sisters," "Crimes and Misdemeanors," "Husbands and Wives"—are cited so often that it may lead some viewers to believe that Allen only made a handful of decent flicks, but that is far from the case. In anticipation of Allen's latest star-studded ensemble comedy, "To Rome With Love" (which opens in Chicago June 29th), here is my list of the top ten most underrated cinematic treasures written and directed by Woody Allen.

10. "What's Up Tiger Lily?" (1966)



What's Up Tiger Lily

Decades before the Mystery Science Theater 3000 crew popularized the art of satirical movie commentary, Allen dubbed his own comedic

dialogue over footage from Senkichi Taniguchi's silly 1965 James Bond knockoff, "International Secret Police: Key of Keys." The resulting film served as Allen's directorial debut, though it essentially plays like an 80-minute cutaway gag on "Family Guy." Originally intended as an hour-long television special, "Tiger Lily" was stretched to feature-length without Allen's consent, and led the director to allegedly disown the project. The expanded version includes wholly unnecessary musical interludes from The Lovin' Spoonful that prove a little Spoonful goes a long way. Yet the film is still worth a look because the dialogue is chockfull of Allen's absurdist wit, and his rearrangement of Taniguchi's footage results in some inspired sight gags. It's also just plain fun to recall the early period in which Allen (like Mel Brooks) was willing to do anything for a laugh. Allen makes his fetish for Oriental women abundantly clear in a final sequence where the end credits roll next to a Japanese actress performing a striptease. The credits are quickly followed by a disclaimer stating that audiences opting to read the credits rather than watch the woman "need to see a psychiatrist or an eye doctor," before morphing into a Snellen eye chart. An honorable mention for the number 10 slot would be Allen's 1994 made-for-TV movie, "Don't Drink the Water," featuring 19-year-old Mayim Bialik, who proves to be a natural charmer when stripped of her forced "Big Bang Theory" affectations.

Quotable Allen (QA): "*The last time I made love was on the Titanic—unfortunately we never finished.*"

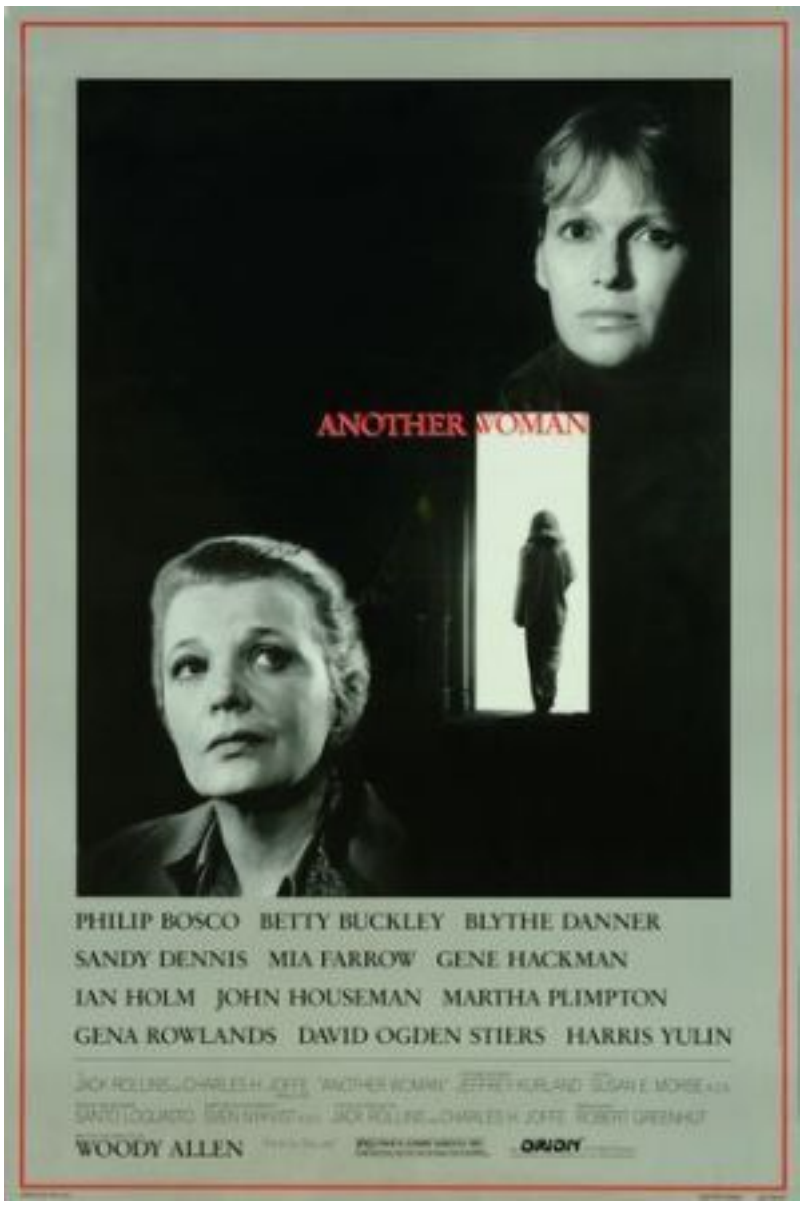
9. "Melinda and Melinda" (2004)

Melinda and Melinda

Is life inherently comic or tragic? That's a question that perpetually appears to haunt Allen's subconscious. On the cusp of his success with 2005's "Match Point," the director's creative juices were clearly flowing in "Melinda and Melinda," which is one of his most cleverly structured films, carrying echoes of the parallel narratives in "Crimes and Misdemeanors." He utilizes two different approaches to tell the same story about a neurotic woman, Melinda (Radha Mitchell), whose sudden arrival disrupts the lives of a dysfunctional couple. It's intriguing to observe how certain story elements, such as the rubbing of a lamp, are portrayed as whimsical in one narrative and wistful in the other. The funniest banter in the comic version is delivered by Hobie (Will Ferrell) and his disinterested wife (Amanda Peet), as their marriage falls swiftly on the rocks. Ferrell was criticized for merely aping Allen's trademark persona, but like Owen Wilson in "Paris," the actor brings a refreshing energy and zest to the dialogue—Hobie's gleeful reaction toward his wife's infidelity is a comic high point. In the dramatic version, Chloë Sevigny is superb as the dutiful caregiver who finds herself attracted to the man that Melinda has embraced as the cure for her diseased mind. In a way, the film involves audiences in the conversation that takes place in Allen's head as he chooses a tone for a particular narrative. And yet, as Melinda notes, tears of sadness and tears of joy are ultimately the same tears.

QA: "*If you're somebody who's nobody, it's no fun to be around anybody who's everybody.*"

8. "Another Woman" (1988)

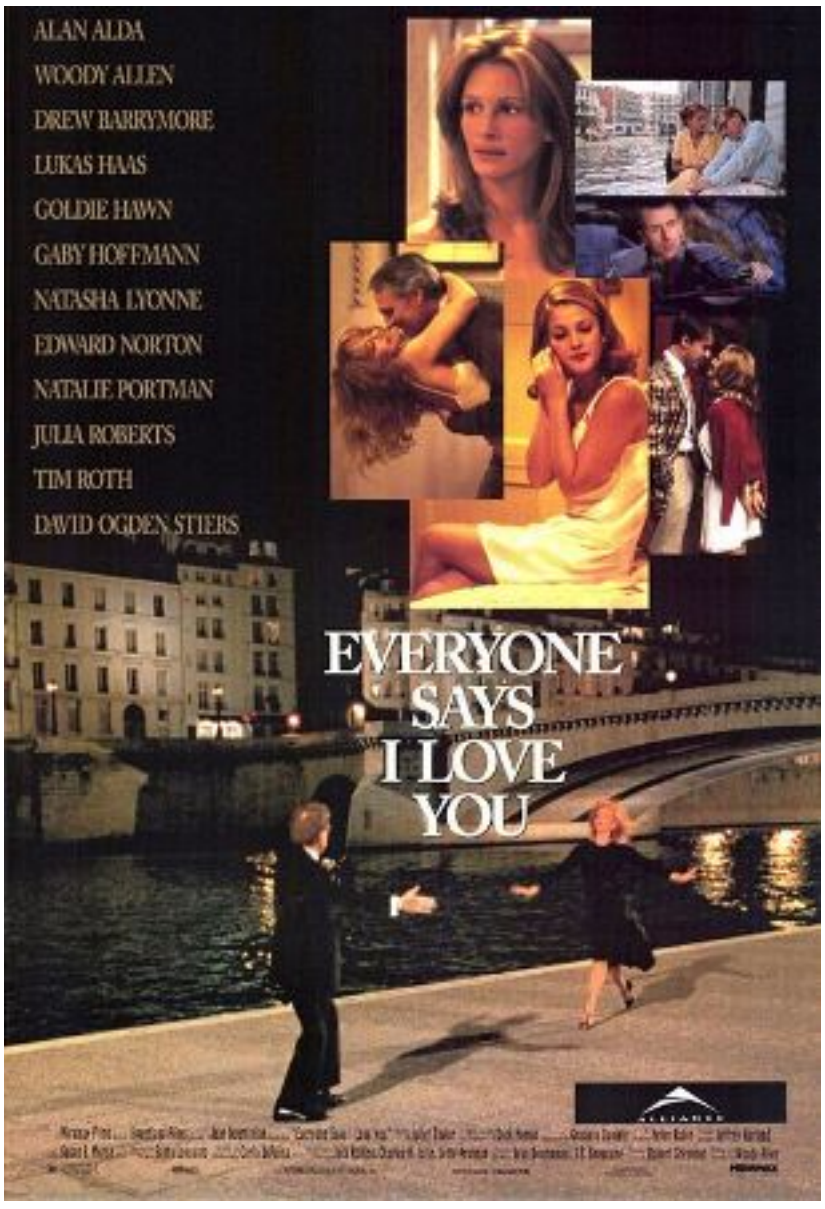


Another Woman

The sterile environments occupied by various Allen characters are carefully designed to protect their inhabitants from the painful messiness of life. Author Marion Post (Gena Rowlands) has been settled in her shell for so long that she's remained oblivious about the effect she has on others. Everything changes when Marion rents out an apartment and is forced to hear herself think. The voice of her inner emotions is embodied by a tormented woman (Mia Farrow), whose words surrealistically echo from the psychiatrist's office next door. Like Ludivine Sagnier in "Swimming Pool," Farrow could be a figment of the author's wild imagination, a twist that Allen and cinematographer Sven Nykvist suggest throughout with elegant subtlety. This is a quietly affecting drama in the Bergman tradition (several comparisons could be made to "Wild Strawberries") anchored by a brilliant performance from Rowlands. As Farrow opens up about her fractured relationship, Marion starts awakening to the fact that her marriage to Dr. Post (Ian Holm) might not be as content as she had thought. It's chilling to hear Farrow's anguished voice question whether she had made the right choice of husband a few years prior to her own stormy separation from Allen. Holm is as frighteningly android-like as he was in "Alien," dismissing an ex-wife with the robotic line, "I accept your condemnation." Frances Conroy, Sandy Dennis and Betty Buckley each deliver caustic cameos that serve as brutal wake-up calls to Marion. Martha Plimpton and Gene Hackman are the film's charismatic life forces, while John Houseman is achingly tragic in his final role, appearing frail and weighed down with regret (David Ogden Stiers is pitch-perfect as the young Houseman). Allen has assembled formidable ensembles in the past, but few have been used as well.

QA: "*One good thing about becoming fifty—you don't have to do it again.*"

7. "Everyone Says I Love You" (1996)

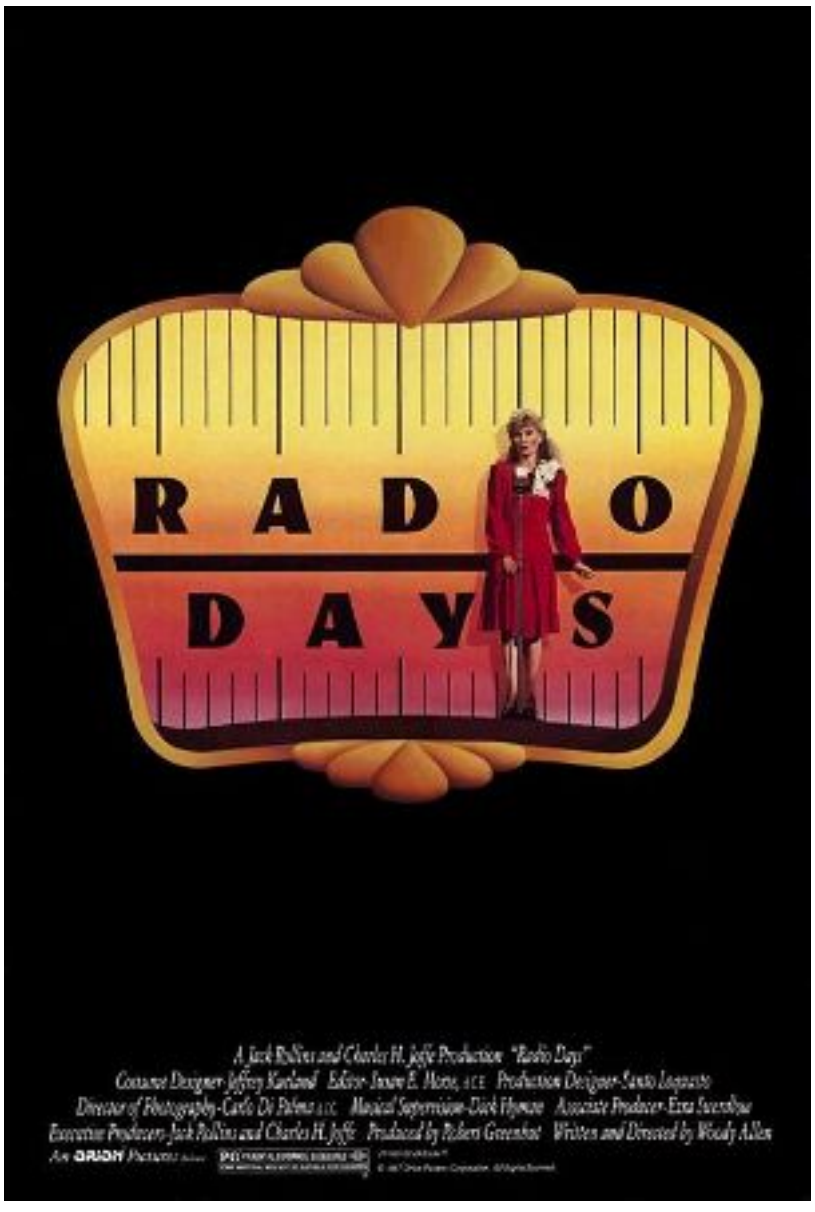


Everyone Says I Love You

Music has played such a crucial role in Allen's work that it was only a matter of time before he attempted to make a musical. With the invaluable aid of master composer Dick Hyman, Allen selected a series of classic tunes and strung them together with a cheerful narrative without bothering to cast actors who could actually singing. This results in some awkward moments—Drew Barrymore's voice is clearly dubbed (by Olivia Hayman), while Julia Roberts seems incapable of pronouncing her "L's"—but the quality of the singing isn't the point. This is an Allen comedy first and foremost that just happens to involve song and dance numbers. That being said, there are some undeniable showstoppers, such as an exuberant rendition of "Makin' Whoopee" that takes place in a hospital as the camera swirls around to capture the intricate choreography. Another upbeat number ironically takes place in a funeral home, while Allen and Goldie Hawn (as his ex-wife) share a bittersweet dance that poignantly reflects their relationship. There's also a great deal to enjoy in the scenes that involve talking, since the script skewers the far left and far right with equally hilarious ingenuity. Hawn believes that prisoners should be permitted to decorate their cells, and appreciates mistreated cons as "social symbols," but has major issues when her daughter decides to date one of them. Meanwhile, her staunchly conservative son (Lukas Haas) is cured of his Republican ideology when a recently unblocked artery brings sufficient oxygen back to his brain. Not every scene works, but it sure is fun to watch Allen and his cast attempt to pull them off.

QA: "*Bring down a copy of my will—and an eraser!*"

6. "Radio Days" (1987)

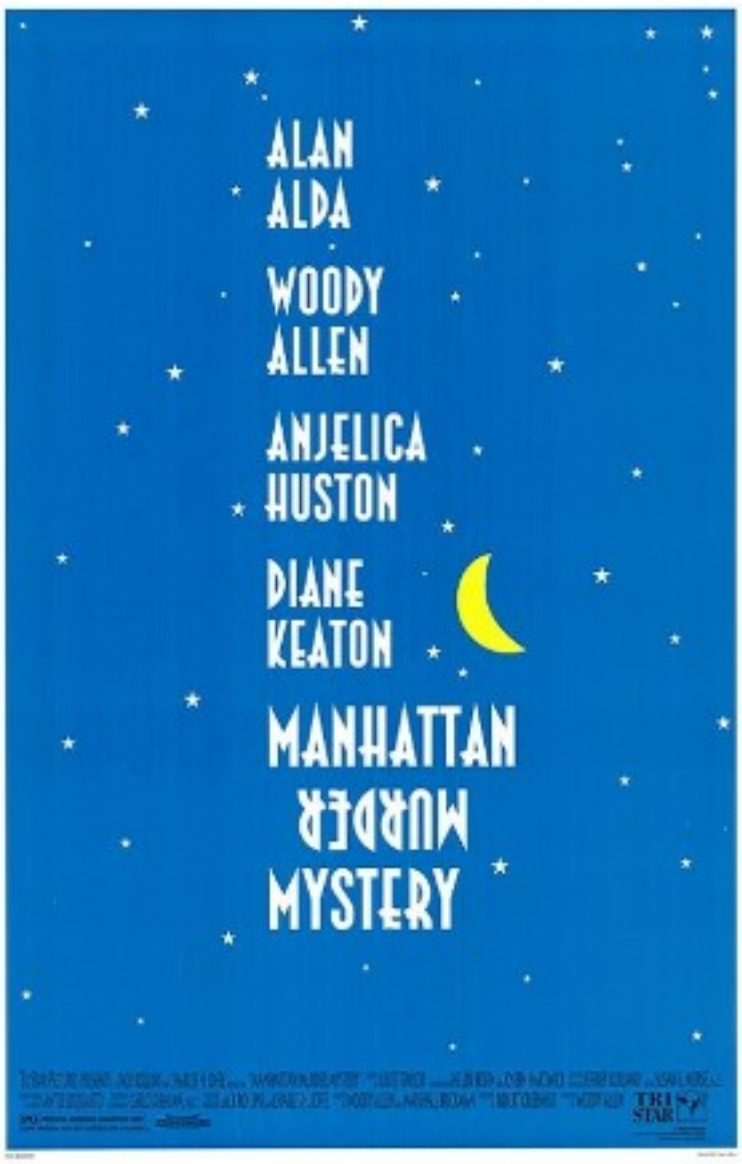


Radio Days

The tendency of one's mind to romanticize the past has served as the basis for many Allen pictures, extending all the way to "Midnight in Paris." "Radio Days" is an exhilarating collection of heightened memories spawned from the rainswept nostalgia of an aging man (Woody Allen) who recalls his childhood in New York's Rockaway Beach, circa 1942. Seth Green plays the young Allen, while Julie Kavner and Michael Tucker are wonderful as his ever-bickering parents. They're among the multitude of Americans who spend their days eavesdropping on the lives of the rich and famous, who discuss their lavish parties on the radio (it's interesting to note the ways in which radio filled the roles now occupied by Twitter). As a would-be radio starlet, Mia Farrow's squeaky, Jean Hagen-inspired voice tends to grate on the nerves, but she still scores some laughs, particularly when she's abducted by a disgruntled lowlife (Danny Aiello) and his all-too-hospitable mother (Gina DeAngeles). From the spectacular opening number, Harry James' "Flight of the Bumblebee," to the final fade out, Allen allows each song to seep into the viewer's bones. He also finds clever ways of incorporating iconic radio events into the narrative, such as when Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" broadcast destroys yet another date for Green's luckless aunt (Dianne Wiest). In a film overflowing with delightful cameos, Kenneth Mars is a standout as a formidable rabbi who becomes furious when he discovers that Green spent the money that he raised for a new state in Palestine to purchase a Masked Avenger decoder ring. Their altercation leads to a rare instance of child abuse slapstick that actually works. Part "Amarcord," part "American Graffiti," this film is an utterly lovely tribute to a bygone era

QA: "*I love him, but what did I do to deserve him?*"

5. "Manhattan Murder Mystery" (1993)

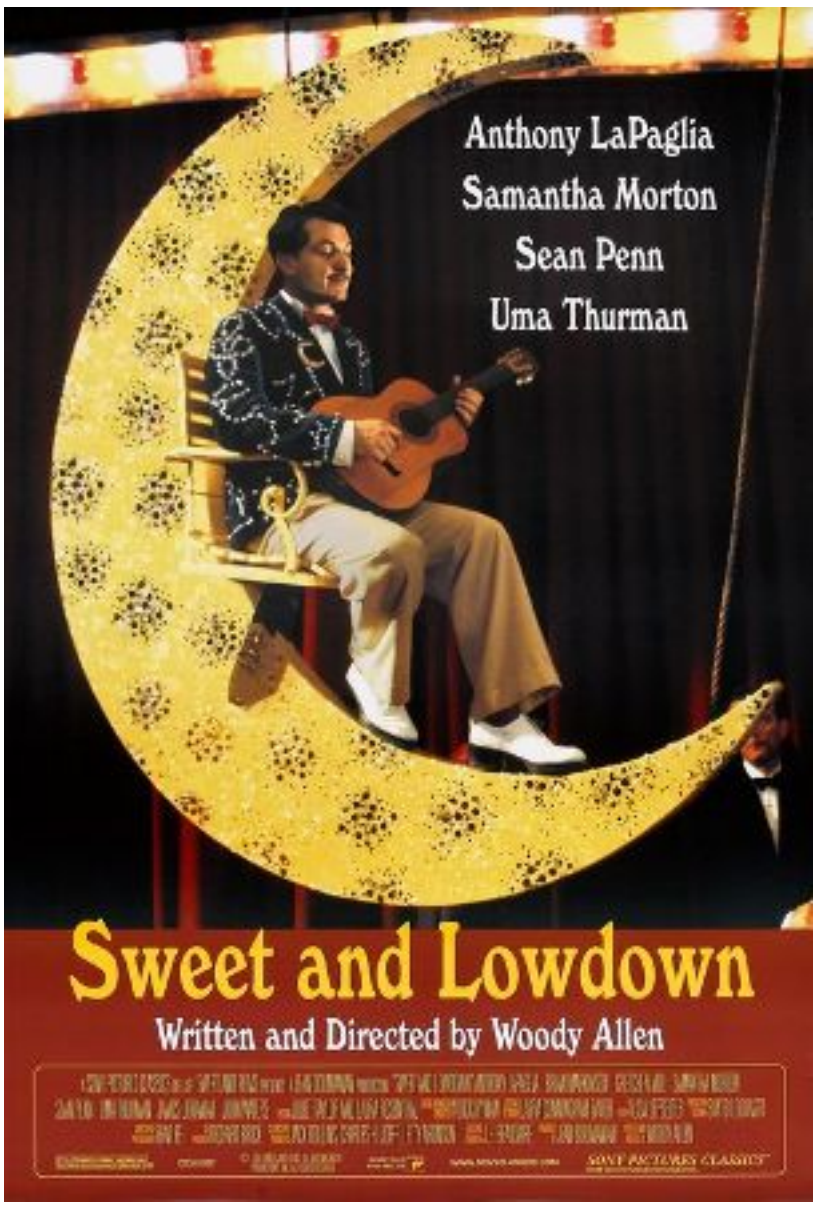


Manhattan Murder Mystery

Perhaps no film in Allen's career is as accessible as "Manhattan Murder Mystery." Even my sister (who is far from an Allen fanatic) can't help getting swept up in the giddy suspense endured by a Manhattan couple as they stumble upon a mystery. This is one of the rare mystery movies where the amateur detectives truly appear to be winging it. Carlo Di Palma's handheld cinematography brings a sense of spontaneity, tension and palpable danger to each scene, thus inspiring an abundance of uneasy laughter, and a great jolting moment set in the claustrophobic confines of an elevator. The probable killer next door (Jerry Adler) is the sort of Raymond Burr-type who seems far too normal to be on the level. So when his wife suddenly dies, he becomes the prime suspect in the eyes of neighbor Carol (Diane Keaton), much to the chagrin of her husband, Larry (Allen). Inspired by the discarded murder subplot from "Annie Hall," this comedy proves that Keaton and Allen hadn't lost an ounce of their uproariously funny, warmhearted chemistry. Keaton's daffiness is a perfect match for Allen's mounting incredulity, and their relationship causes the arbitrary plot to be placed on the back-burner. Filling his reliable role as "the other man" in an Allen love triangle, Alan Alda has a wonderful moment in a parked car, as he keeps a lookout for a shady character. When he sees her, he shouts her name while crouching behind the dashboard. The hilarity of this scene is emblematic of the film's appeal—it allows audiences to share in the thrill of getting away with something.

QA: "*There's nothing wrong with you that can't be cured with a little Prozac and a polo mallet.*"

4. "Sweet and Lowdown" (1999)

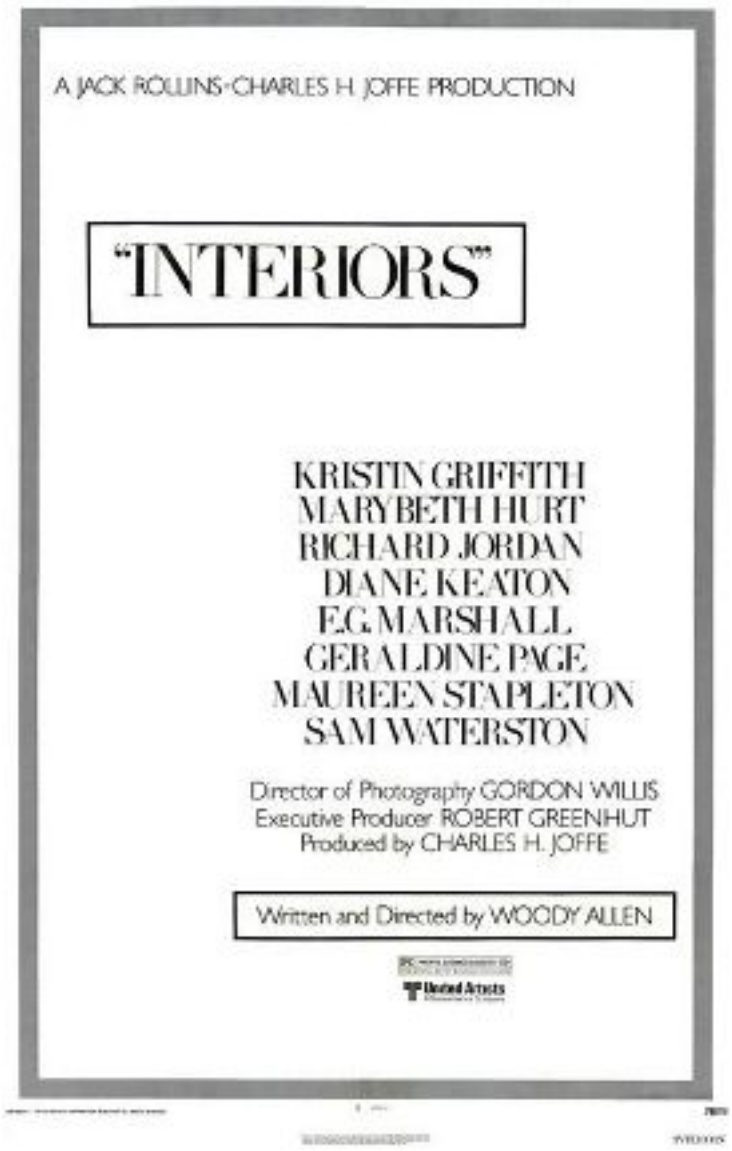


Sweet and Lowdown

This is one of the most original films of Allen's career, and also one of his unsung achievements, despite its two Oscar nominations. First-time viewers could easily be fooled into believing that the main character, Emmet Ray (Sean Penn), was a real jazz guitarist in the '30s. Allen has a series of knowledgeable talking heads interject factoids about Ray's life, a conceit that further strengthens the illusion that Ray was a real man. He might as well have been. At first sight, Ray is about as far removed from an Allen protagonist as one could imagine, but on closer inspection, one can detect shades of Marion Post. He's a self-deluded savant who feels glimmers of affection for a young mute lass, Hattie (Samantha Morton), before retreating beneath his carefree façade. Only after the pang of loss causes his repressed emotions to bubble toward the surface does Ray obtain the ability to perform the best music of his career—and what beautiful music he makes. This is the only Allen film that inspired me to purchase its soundtrack, and it has since then become one of my favorite albums. The performance sequences are flat-out thrilling, with Penn masterfully mimicking the fingerings of Howard Alden's awe-inspiring guitar solos. One is reminded of De Niro's bullheaded antiheroes in Scorsese pictures while watching Penn charge blindly through his life, unaware of the signals that could prove to be his salvation. Morton's portrayal is worthy of the great screen sirens, as she projects the humorous innocence and nagging sadness of Chaplin. Though the film is a drama at heart, it does include one of Allen's funniest set-pieces, requiring Penn to be gracelessly lowered onto the stage while hanging from a plywood moon during a performance. It's a great bit of physical comedy that culminates in an explosive instance of impeccable comic timing.

QA: "*You got heft. Makes a guy feel like he's been someplace.*"

3. "Interiors" (1978)



Interiors

When it arrived in theaters, “Interiors” was the first Allen film to deeply polarize his fans. Some rejected it simply because it wasn’t a comedy. Others dismissed it as a pretentious imitation of the Ingmar Bergman films that Allen held in such high esteem. Yet there were a handful of people (mainly critics) who were blown away by the director’s assured command of tone, which was more evocative of Eugene O’Neill’s operatic family dramas. I consider myself a member of the third group, though the film’s Bergmanesque compositions, gorgeously lensed by Gordon Willis (“The Godfather”), shouldn’t be ignored. This is not the cold, cerebral film that its detractors have suggested. Its emotions are all the more lacerating because they are kept burrowed beneath a seemingly tranquil surface. Eve (Geraldine Page), the overbearing interior designer and matriarch whose breakdown coupled with electric shock therapy has led to her downward spiral, is the forbearer of Marion Post and Emmet Ray. Her obsessive need for a carefully calculated environment has proven to have detrimental effects on her grown children. Joey (Mary Beth Hurt) is bursting with feelings, but can’t find a way to express herself. Flyn (Kristin Griffith) has beautiful features but lives a vapid life devoid of substance. Renata (Diane Keaton) is a successful writer, but her success proves to be of little consolation. Her growing preoccupation with her own mortality has caused the outside world to appear threatening. After Eve’s husband (E.G. Marshall) asks her for a trial separation, Allen externalizes her subdued agony by interrupting the silence with the cacophonous noise of strapping tape as its applied to Eve’s doors and windows prior to her latest suicide attempt. Maureen Stapleton is vivacious as a vulgarian who provides a splash of red on the family’s canvas awash in sterile beiges. The climax is a tour de force of symbolism so exquisite and provocative that it does, in fact, warrant comparison with Bergman and O’Neill. “Interiors” is a knock-out.

QA: “*I can’t seem to shake the real implication of dying. It’s terrifying. The intimacy of it embarrasses me.*”

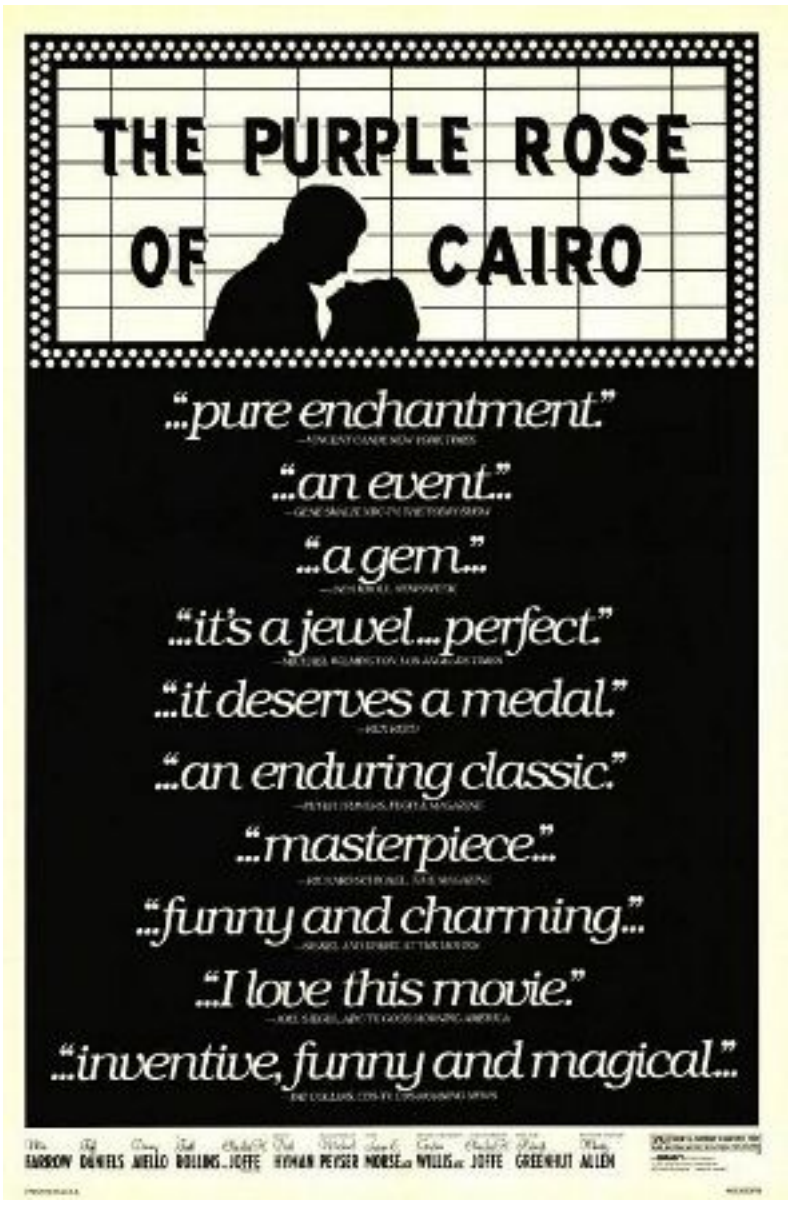
2. “Love and Death” (1975)

Love and Death

Perhaps it's no coincidence that the films Allen made before and after his timeless 1977 classic, "Annie Hall," were among the best of his career. Whereas "Interiors" signified the director's more serious filmmaking aspirations, "Love and Death" sounded the death knell for what fans would wistfully refer to as the "earlier, funnier" Allen. This farce, set in czarist Russia, parodies the exact same Bergmanesque camera angles that Allen would earnestly utilize a mere few years later—in a way, "Love and Death" and "Interiors" offer the ultimate "Melinda and Melinda" experience. Yet even if viewers are unfamiliar with Bergman, as well as the literature of Russian novelists such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, they will have no trouble enjoying the rapid-fire gags and briskly paced hilarity of this oft-forgotten gem. Every bit as tirelessly inventive as Allen's 1973 hit, "Sleeper," this film further proves that Diane Keaton was far and away the best screen partner Allen ever had. Their laughably incoherent philosophical debates include some of the biggest laughs of any Allen pictures. When Keaton coos about a man who warmed the cockles of her heart, Allen jealousy whines, "Nothing like hot cockles!" When Keaton backs up an argument by utilizing words of wisdom uttered by Attila the Hun, Allen exclaims, "You're quoting a Hun to me?!" It's clear that the Bill Murray of "Ghostbusters" was somehow influenced by the Allen of "Love and Death," who was himself influenced by Bob Hope and Groucho Marx. He views the godless universe filled with phony prophets and wrongly accused men from a detached perspective that enables him to laugh in its face. His ensemble, consisting entirely of straightmen, causes him to appear like the smartest and most nervous guy in the room. As Russia becomes engulfed in the chaos of the Napoleonic War, Allen is always standing on the sidelines, excusing himself with the claim that he's due back on planet Earth.

QA: "*The key here is to not think of death as an end, but as a very effective way of cutting down on your expenses.*"

1. "The Purple Rose of Cairo" (1985)



The Purple Rose of Cairo

Allen's 14th feature is, quite simply, as great a picture as any in his filmography, and one of the most profound films ever made about the power of cinema. For battered Depression-era waitress Cecilia (Mia Farrow), cinema has a cleansing power, but it comes with a price. For a few fleeting hours, she's able to lose herself entirely within the frivolous concerns of the wealthy and beautiful, before being spat back out onto the pavement. The turbulence of her reality has caused her to hunger for the comfort of illusion. It's the same comfort that people of faith find at church, a communal venue not unlike a movie theater. After Cecilia attends several viewings of the same film, a handsome, good-natured character named Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels), becomes so taken with his ardent fan that he steps off the screen and into her life. And so begins an existential comedy on par with Pirandello's landmark play, "Six Characters in Search of an Author." Tom provides Cecilia with all the joy and fulfillment that she never received from her loutish, abusive husband (Danny Aiello). His sole downfall is that he's not real. There's an unforgettable moment when Tom hands out fake dollar bills to men standing in line at a soup kitchen, providing them with a sense of superficial hope. Cinema specializes in giving us hopes and dreams, none of which are tangible, yet hope in itself is more tangible than lies. The hope that Tom represents is more real than the artificiality of Gil Shepherd (Daniels), the actor who's skilled in manipulating people in order to preserve his career. Shepherd shares in the public's bewilderment that his character has somehow gained a life of its own. Tom's abandoned co-stars are left on the screen to reflect on the absurdity of their existence, while panicky studio executives desperately attempt to secure the fate of their potential crowd-pleaser. I'm sure Allen's studio executives could relate when they watched the director's final cut, and predicted that it would be a box office smash…as long as the director agreed to shoot a happier ending. Allen, of course, stuck to his guns, and released the film with its gloriously poetic yet distressingly downbeat final moments intact, resulting in great reviews and little public fanfare. A quarter century later, Allen made a strikingly similar film about a man who chooses reality over his dream world, and ends up flourishing. The film went on to become the most lucrative picture of Allen's career. Go figure.

QA: "*I'm in love with a wonderful new man. He's fictional, but you can't have everything.*"


[16]

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