

Blu-ray Review: Minor Woody Allen Comedy 'To Rome with Love' Still Delights

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CHICAGO – After acknowledging that the rewards of reality are infinitely preferable to the shallow pleasures of a nostalgic dreamworld in his Oscar-winning crowd-pleaser, “Midnight in Paris,” Woody Allen’s tirelessly neurotic psyche appears to be more calm and serene than ever before. Perhaps his compulsion to make one picture a year has finally brought him some sort of therapeutic catharsis.

His eagerly anticipated follow-up, “To Rome with Love,” is an entertaining trifle that functions as little more than an absurdist travelogue, but it’s also his most relaxed, causally playful offering in many a moon. Considering the unfathomable potential of its powerhouse cast, the script’s hit-or-miss trajectory is a considerable letdown. The film wasn’t quite worth the full price of admission in theaters, but as a Friday night rental, cinephiles could do a whole lot worse. As for die-hard Allen fans (such as myself), there is plenty here to savor.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

As a hodgepodge of tall tales set in its titular city, “To Rome with Love” is a mixed bag of fresh delicacies and reheated leftovers. The best story thread, by far, features Ellen Page as an unlikely seductress who casts her spell on a flummoxed Jesse Eisenberg, an actor who’s often been compared to (and confused with) Page’s “Juno” co-star, Michael Cera. Eisenberg seemed destined to work with Allen ever since he channeled the director’s signature mannerisms in Noah Baumbach’s “The Squid and the Whale.” Funny that Eisenberg would somehow get paired with Baumbach discovery (and former indie queen) Greta Gerwig in Allen’s delicious tale of a seemingly happy couple whose world is upheaved by the arrival of a famous friend (played by Page). Aside from a few hilariously pained reaction shots, Eisenberg’s role falls disappointingly flat, though Page more than compensates with her exuberantly rapturous turn. As lensed by the great Darius Khondji, Page has never looked more luminous, and has great fun delving into her character’s boldly flirtatious antics. What makes this vignette even better is the hovering presence of Alec Baldwin as a wistful gentleman who wryly offers Eisenberg’s character words of urgent advice. Is Baldwin an embodiment of the young man’s conscience or is the entire Eisenberg/Page/Gerwig love triangle taking place in Baldwin’s head as he reminisces about old flames? Thankfully, Allen never explicitly answers these tantalizing questions.



To Rome with Love was released on Blu-ray and DVD on January 15th, 2013.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Infidelity is one of the major recurring themes in Allen's work, but it has rarely been dealt with as inconsequentially as it is here. Each plot line embraces it with cheerful inevitability, devoid of the emotional stakes that made "Match Point" and "Vicky Cristina Barcelona" so compelling. Penélope Cruz makes the most of obvious punchlines in her one-note role as a prostitute mistaken for a bumbling man's fiancé. The surrealist yarn following Roberto Benigni as he randomly achieves meaningless celebrity status is tedious from the get-go and increasingly interminable with each successive appearance. Naturally, Allen gives himself many of the best lines as a kvetching New Yorker (what else?) visiting his daughter (Allison Pill) abroad, while attempting to turn her fiancé's father (Fabio Armiliato) into an opera star. Proving utterly incapable of halting his incessant stream of quips and asides, the filmmaker hasn't been this funny onscreen since 2002's "Hollywood Ending," in which he played a filmmaker desperately attempting to keep his psychosomatic blindness a secret. Here's hoping the nebbish he plays here, along with his long-suffering wife (Judy Davis, who gave her best performance in Allen's 1992 masterpiece, "Husbands and Wives"), get a spinoff of their own.

"To Rome with Love" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and French audio tracks and is one of the very rare Woody Allen films to be accompanied by a making-of featurette, though the director himself is conspicuously absent. Producer Letty Aronson is left to ponder how Allen somehow managed to direct the local actors and crew members without being able to speak a word of Italian. As a matter of fact, that sounds like the perfect premise for Allen's next picture. Call it "Cinecittà Finale."

'To Rome with Love' is released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and stars Woody Allen, Roberto Benigni, Alessandro Tiberi, Alessandra Mastronardi, Ellen Page, Alec Baldwin, Jesse Eisenberg, Penélope Cruz, Fabio Armiliato, Judy Davis, Flavio Parenti, Alison Pill and Greta Gerwig. It was written and directed by Woody Allen. It was released on January 15th, 2013. It is rated R.

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