



Woody Allen ogles go-go girl Lee Anne Fahey in "Play It Again, Sam."  
"Allen should be revered as an endangered species, a national resource"

# One Comic Who Wants to Be Funny

By HARRY FLECKS

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IT seems almost unfair to review Woody Allen. In this day and age anyone who can produce actual *humorous* humor ought to be placed in a jar in the Library of Congress, fed delicate sweetmeats and set out to stud—revered, as a national resource, an endangered species, a grim reminder of the way things aren't any more. When vaudeville died in the thirties as a breeding ground for humor we should have expected this drought. When the spoken word faded out of radio at the end of the forties, when TV executives began their tawdry affair with Mr. Nielson, when Bob Hope achieved senility and found that warriors were his best audience, we should have known. The Borscht Belt now wafts a long line of initiates along a familiar road to Las Vegas, by way of the Tonight Show and mediocrity. The coffeehouse circuit, drying up, supplies TV talk shows with low-keyed monologue writers—urbane, pleasant, but not funny. In movies, only Elaine May and Woody Allen survive as reminders of what Hollywood humor lost when its training camps folded.

Woody Allen comes most directly in a line from Benchley and Perelman and White—primarily verbal, intellectual humorists. Grounded in a kind of gentleness, their humor trod delicately from one side of the looking glass to the other—an abstract, heartless zaniness; cruel to logic in order to be kind to the decency of all good people. In its own small way such humor, as all humor, served human liberty.

When the world caught up with this dream and shattered it by undermining our faith in the decency of good people, humor had to reorient itself to an emerging myth of the world, a new rhetoric in which decent people did horrible things. Brautigan and (Continued on Page 3)

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Barthelme chose to follow that element of American humor closest to poetry, the abstract madness of it—Brauligan as a gentle cosmic moralist and Barthelme as an intuitive poet of fragmentation. Their work grew away from humor, becoming more seriously insane—fairy tales with only the didactic or frightening parts left in. Others, like Heller and Donleavy, turned to black humor, the dismal if faintly comic absurdity of what social reality itself has become—the grim, self-defeating humor of fatality.

Allen is one of the few artists with comic genius left today who has chosen to remain funny. His humor is basically college humor, or—as we call it when it graduates—New York humor. Allen removed the sophomoric from this genre and resisted the fatal decline into cynicism or rigid formula. He has miraculously survived the times by his willingness to be vulgar and cheap, if he wants to, and with his stubborn romanticism intact. Nothing is serious in Allen's world but kindness. This is remarkable enough in itself, and, as I said, it leaves criticism of Allen's work looking a little irrelevant and mean. (But, as our greatest humorist, Ring Lardner, once sympathized, What of It?)

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Unfortunately, perhaps, Woody Allen is not a movie director—in the sense that Mike Nichols is not a movie director. His genius lies in the episodic and works best within the narrowest limits—in his short pieces for *The New Yorker*, or set down in the midst of the banal repartee of a TV talk show. Like Nichols, Allen can create brilliant vignettes and structure-perfect one-liners on film, but has not yet made anything consistent enough to be called a great movie comedy. Great movie comedies are impossible to make and when one comes along it is best classified as miracle. The problem is that humor is basically episodic—you can't create a plot that is in itself funny, yet a movie comedy must have a unity if it is to be more than

a string of funny shorts. A comedy plot must have a certain degree of respectability and solidity to it, so that the humor has something to play against, yet cannot be so intricate or serious that it detracts from the flow of laughs.

The Marx Brothers surrounded themselves in their films with cardboard characters and situations of great solemnity, and proceeded to wreak havoc upon them. The set-up worked because the cardboard dignity they attacked was and is a real part of our world. But less and less so. The puffed-up caricatures of doctors and statesmen and professors are less and less relevant to our modern view of the world; we don't need the Marx Brothers to deflate these pompous balloons any more, as real events are serving that purpose all too well.

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Pure visual comedy has been dead for 40 years in the cinema, although people often talk about it as if it were still here, at least as a standard. And it certainly isn't. Visual comedy, in the hands of its greatest practitioners, Chaplin and Keaton, was closer to the poetry of dreams than to humor. Chaplin was funnier than Keaton because his movies were visually less perfect. Chaplin himself was the sole transformer of the images in his films; his presence was their primary beauty. There was always a little visual dullness there to put an edge on a laugh. He made great movies simply by stepping into the frame often enough. Even his "messages" and sentimentalism couldn't drag him down.

Keaton, on the other hand, made a few perfect visual movies, whose corny themes became actual filmed myths. He realized, from shot to shot, dreamlike entities from the American and universal unconscious, with a subtlety and power equalled in American films only by Griffith and Welles. Dreams, like the movies of the great silent comedians, are like humor stripped of its formulas and restraints, but at their best and deepest they are not funny. Visual comedy, even if it were a

practical alternative for modern film comedy, is no answer to the problem of modern humor.

There is no substitute in a movie comedy for sustained comic genius, and this is why comedy films, unlike westerns and thrillers, cannot be merely crafted. Mike Nichols has an incisive feeling for the comic vignette, and for a while one looked to Nichols for a great movie comedy. "Catch-22" was pretty awful—big and glossy and out of control. Its circular construction was a painfully obvious and ineffective attempt to impose a cinematic idea onto a line of skits. It was so top-heavy and self-satisfied that even the few funny scenes were drowned. Still, there were funny scenes, the acting was sharp and sustained, and the book was a difficult one to film in any case. But then came the insufferable pompousness and pointedness of "Carnal Knowledge," a movie so mesmerized by its own message that its events seemed to be going on in a vacuum. Humor simply can't be "used" to prove a point—ideas emerge from humor and not the other way around. What distinguishes the films of Elaine May and Woody Allen from the gaudy glib preachings of a Mike Nichols is their grand lack of pretension and "art," and it is to this approach we must look for the great modern comedy which may yet emerge.

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Woody Allen's films look cheap, the way the Marx Brothers' films looked cheap. His plots are either silly or obvious. It would be a mistake to think of these facets of his films as lapses. I believe they are deliberate and shrewd neglects, whose message is: There is no message, this film is no jewel, I've got no debts with destiny to pay. Allen's carelessness opens up the possibilities of humor, because there is nothing at stake in his work but an evening at the movies. Whatever we're going to get out of Woody Allen will be out of his humor and, for a man of Allen's genius, this is an amazing stand to take. He and Elaine May are the only

comedians making films today who have that kind of faith in humor. (Even "M\*A\*S\*H," which was a very funny film, tried to be an anti-war movie. At its best it was merely anti-bureaucracy, and at its very best it was anti-pretension—which all humor is.)

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Needless to say, Allen and May have not yet succeeded in making anything like a great movie comedy. Allen has never mustered the concentrated humor, that perfect string of laughs, that can carry our high spirits right through an hour and a half in a dark movie theater. Our goodwill toward a comedian has an unfortunately short span in the movies. For some reason we resent a flat joke in the company of good ones, and if the big laughs are poorly spaced we can become exasperated waiting for them. In fact, if a movie comedian ever allows us to be aware of "waiting for them," the movie is in some sense lost. A stand-up comic, of course, can shape his joke plan, even as he shapes timing within a joke, by altering it according to the feedback of a live audience. Comic prose is usually short enough for the writer to visualize in its entirety. But in movies a comedian just has to know. A script has to be dense enough, comically, to weather the change from paper to film—losing a laugh here and gaining one there.

On top of that, the comic has to be inventive enough before the camera to change and elaborate on the humor without messing up the overall timing. A great movie comedy can never be perfect, the way a great western conceivably could be. But above a certain level of consistent humor, the movie comedy can induce a kind of restrained euphoria and clearheadedness equaled in no other art and comparable only to a great movie musical.

"Play It Again, Sam" was scripted but not directed by Woody Allen. He stars in it and you could say that, except for its slickness, it is a Woody Allen film. The slickness is not particularly

offensive—it's plain, unpretentious Hollywood gloss, like that of "What's New, Pussycat?"—and it has its advantages. The film keeps moving and looks smooth enough to give an illusion of consistency, where the script is flat or poorly timed. But the consistency is just illusion and doesn't satisfy very deeply. The film is very funny at times and always pleasant, but again it works only in vignettes—it doesn't keep you up.

Woody Allen's comic "character" is fairly well established by now. It draws

heavily on his physical appearance, the irreverent imp that seems to follow naturally from an intelligent little man with a face like a caricature of sheepishness. The main lever of Allen's humor is his pretension to male chauvinism, his compulsive sexual boasting. We see a gulf between the wily Casanova in his mind and the elfin cartoon character before us on the screen.

But there is more to the comic "Woody Allen" than this apparent and basically tragic inadequacy. Because we sense behind the facade

a man who is not inadequate, who has no real concern for the binding conventions of society, who plays every game as a game, with a ferocious unconcern for reality that is actually courageous. We do not think, of Allen's comic character: poor guy, he can't make it in a man's world; but rather: this whole game is quite a spectacular joke. Allen doesn't demand any conclusions from us, he merely deflates the manly poses in such a way that we have to think twice about them. In "Play It Again, Sam" the theme of sexual poses is examined more directly than in Allen's previous comedy.

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The movie presents, in fact, a simple moralistic tale: a man possessed by the desire to be Humphrey Bogart finds unhappiness and sexual frustration until he falls in love with his best friend's wife. Allen's own wife has left him, at the beginning of the film. He falls into a state of hysterical slovenliness. The middle of the film details his numerous sexual disasters with a wide variety of women, during which time he grows closer to his friend's wife, played by Diane Keaton; she is his companion and confidante and sexual mentor. At the end of the film they have an affair, which brings her closer to her husband and Allen closer to himself. It also gives him a chance to re-enact the last scene of "Casablanca"—Bogart's great moment of principled kindness. The moral is: be yourself, and also, help people out. Extraordinary. The film works, in its limited way, because Allen's sexual pretensions are so painfully ridiculous, and also because the screen rapport between Allen and Diane Keaton is real and believable and a joy to watch.

Miss Keaton is genuinely pleasant on-screen—one senses a depth in her that raises her characterization above the level of routine ingénue. The part is not particularly substantial, but she relates to Allen without the kind of manic cuteness of, say, Sandy Duncan in her TV ads—the fake flightiness

and embarrassment that has become a commercial speciality, and that Keaton herself was hired to do when she was the "Hour After Hour" girl. None of her screen roles so far gives us a good idea of what she could do with a fine part, but they leave us with pleasant expectations. Her husband, played by Tony Roberts, has even less of a role, which he handles comfortably enough.

There are some extremely good visual scenes, deriving their humor from Allen's intense clumsiness when he is on the make. It's basically the same device Elaine May used to lesser effect in "A New Leaf," and variations on this device seem to be about as far as modern screen comedians can go visually. Which is not to say that Allen's basic humor is totally devoid of visual aids. Even considering the inherent humor in his physical appearance, Allen has become quite a good actor—his variations on "disguised fear" are inventive and comically convincing. His portrayal of the insecure man behind the poses is less subtle than Richard Benjamin's very similar characterizations, but we are less aware, with Allen, of the actor behind the mask. Allen's love for and identification with his character is so great that he brings an unreserved wholeheartedness to his performances. He doesn't, as Benjamin does, give us the comfort of believing that his character is not really him.

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The only really negative thing I can say about "Play It Again, Sam" is that it has the most inane and useless "obligatory pot scene" in recent film history, and there have been some extremely inane and useless ones in the past few years. Otherwise, it is the most genuinely funny film we have had since "Bananas." It would be nice to leave it at that but, sadly enough, one can't. One walks out feeling a little discouraged; the brilliant comic scenes and lines remind one of the film this could have been—of the great movie comedy Woody Allen may still make one day.