

1

Woody Allen's Lovable Anxious Schlemiels

Sanford Pinsker

Woody Allen's anxious, bespectacled *punin* has become something of a national icon: he is the "beautiful loser" par excellence, the man whose urban, end-of-the-century anxieties mirror—albeit, in exaggeration—our own. To be sure, his persona is hardly as *sui generis* as many of his more adoring fans suppose; scholars need not break a sweat to establish Allen's lineage to the Little Man of Robert Benchley, to Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, indeed, to a host of precursors from the pages of the *New Yorker* magazine. Modern humor depends on trouble, and Allen suffers not only all the indignities that come with a weakling's ninety-eight-pound body but also those he conjures up in his doom-riddled mind.

No doubt a part of the Allen persona we meet on the silver screen was formed in the noisy, yoo-hooing world of his Brooklyn childhood. His memories—even if one gives comic exaggeration its due—are filled with people who shouted rather than talked, who ended their sentences with exclamation points, and who could do neither without waving their hands. Such a world—by degrees combative and warm, ebullient and anxious—tends to divide itself between those who reach over others for a ketchup bottle and those who end up getting knocked off their luncheonette stools.

But that much said, Allen's persona adds up to something more than the usual formulation of yet another modern humorist with trouble dripping from his sleeve; for one thing, his *tsuris* has a metaphysical dimension Allen insists upon (even at times belabors) and that we recognize like a thumbprint. At one point a philosophical Allen argues that "the universe is merely a

fleeting idea in God's mind—a pretty uncomfortable thought, particularly if you've just made a down payment on a house"; at another he wonders if we "can actually 'know' the universe? My God, it's hard enough finding your way around Chinatown." Allen, in short, characteristically muses in juxtapositions. The result is a prose style in which airy ideas and gritty urban details are forced to share floor space in the same paragraph, and often on opposing sides of a semicolon.

Mark Shechner argues that Allen's persona has always been awash in "high-school existentialism"—that is, longer on posture and predictable subject (as Shechner enumerates them, "God is dead; life has no meaning; man is a lonely speck in a vast, impersonal void") than on hard, sustained thought.¹ Perhaps so, but there is, I would suggest, a difference between taking Allen's comedy seriously and taking it solemnly. Shechner, to his credit, recognizes the essential difference between the persona a comic both creates and needs and the biographical self who may have given it impetus:

Every comic needs some theatrical self [in Allen's case, the schlemiel as sexual loser-cum-narcissist] to be not only his trademark, but his muse, the inventor of the jokes he tells. The comedian plays host to his other self which lives off him as much as he lives off it, and unless he collapses into his persona entirely, he is by profession a case of split personality. Allen the comic, we are led to understand, is by no means the same man as Allen the clarinetist; and such a self-division, it appears, is something of a professional standard. It is not only for purposes of ethnic whitewashing that nearly all Jewish comedians perform under stage names. So dependent is the comic on his other self that he comes to seek shelter under it, and asking any comedian to step out from behind the mask is a little like asking Harpo Marx to speak.

By contrast, Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, not only fails to see any distinctions between Allen the persona and Allen the personality but also insists that both of them measure up to his own high intellectual standards. Bloom, of course, has made something of a specialty of the jeremiad, and it is hardly surprising he should see dangers to seriousness everywhere in our lack of critical standards, in our worship of a mushy-headed relativism, in our vulgarized notions of nihilism. Indeed, if Bloom is even half right, our national fiber hasn't been in such bad shape since the days when Jonathan Edwards conjured up the image of us as Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. One sees sure signs of our national decay, Bloom argues, in the sheer number of colleges and universities racing to establish women's studies programs, in the rock music that teenagers blast through their Walkmans, and in such unlikely places as the films of Woody Allen.

Allan Bloom means to bash them all, but it is his attack on the Allen known as Woody that speaks most directly to our culture's mixed feelings

about comedy, at least as they are articulated by its “intellectuals.” According to Bloom,

Woody Allen's comedy [i.e., *Zelig*] is nothing but a set of variations on the theme of the man who does not have a real “self” or “identity,” and who feels superior to the inauthentically self-satisfied people because he is conscious of his situation and at the same time inferior to them because they are “adjusted.”²

In short, Allen makes us feel comfortable with our nihilism, and for this sin Bloom can offer book lists but no forgiveness: “Woody Allen really has nothing to tell us about inner-directedness. Nor does David Reisman [in *The Lonely Crowd*] nor, going further back, does Erik Fromm. One has to get to Heidegger to learn something serious about the grim facts of what inner-directedness might really mean.”

Reading such testy, strident judgments, one begins to suspect that the Allan with the problem is Bloom rather than Woody. What *The Closing of the American Mind* demonstrates when it blathers on about a film like *Zelig* is precisely what H. L. Mencken once defined as the puritan temper—namely, a deep suspicion that somebody, somewhere is having a good time.³ It has been with us, in one form or another, from the days when Thomas Morton established his Maypole at Merry Mount in 1628 (only to have Governor John Endicott transmogrify it, in Hawthorne's version of the tale, into a whipping post) to *Animal House* and the latest round of efforts to exile fraternities from college campuses.

Unfortunately, Bloom is not the only one who thinks of Allen as a philosopher rather than as an entertainer. In *Annie Hall*, the boorish young professor of film studies (now it would be know as semiotics) holds forth on Marshall McLuhan while Allen's protagonist does a slow burn. Such show-offs know everything about the medium of cinema except what makes people love it. Unable to contain his indignation any longer, he calls the scholar's bluff, only to have McLuhan himself appear from behind a cardboard cutout and wholeheartedly agree. There may not be many victories for the Alvy Singer who wins and then loses Annie Hall, who has worried, and continues to worry, about life's assorted troubles, but this is surely one of them.

Indeed, Allen has been “getting even” with brainy, professorial types since the days when he published his *New Yorker* sketches collected as *Getting Even* (1971). Sometimes the cracks take the form of memorable quips, like the one in *Manhattan* (1979) about the possibility of *Commentary* and *Dissent* merging into a new journal for New York intellectuals to be called *Dysentery*. And of course, there is *Stardust Memories* (1980)—a sustained exercise in biting the hands that have fed him, whether they belong to Allen's

overly adoring fans, his reviewers, or those who subject his work to intense scholarly critical scrutiny.

Not long ago I was struck by the painstaking rigor a scholar has brought to bear on Mark Twain's reading habits. Apparently, this professor has assembled enough evidence to prove what every serious reader of Twain already knew—namely, that Twain owned and read and, yes, *underlined text* in large numbers of books and that he perpetrated the mythos of the rustic, homespun spinner of tall tales and dispenser of lowfalutin wisdom so as not to put off any segment of the population with the ready cash to buy one of his books or to crowd into one of his lectures. My hunch is that this scholar could demonstrate quite the opposite point about Woody Allen—namely, that he reads dust jackets and reviews, rather than Real Books, and that he perpetrates the mythos of a sensitive New York egghead so he will remain the darling of those who also make it a point to keep up with our culture by reading the *New York Review of Books*.

But this much said, let me hasten to add that, while I don't count Allen among our philosophers or significant social critics, I do think that his genius for parody and the systematic care and feeding he has given to his schlemielish persona are important additions to our cultural scene. Most humorists begin as counterpunchers—that is, as those who keep their eyes and ears fixed on the elements of the mainstream most susceptible to comic exaggeration. Parody, in short, allows one to prop his or her work against what is already known, what is already there. Franklin, Twain, Benchley—each started as a parodist, which is to say, as a ventriloquist with a difference. So, too, did the Allan Stewart Konigsberg who had mailed his jokes to newspaper columnists, worked for ad agencies, and paid his first showbiz dues writing material for other comics.

The difference, of course, is that when Konigsberg transmogrified himself into a *New Yorker* humorist named Woody Allen he labored under the long shadows cast by predecessors such as Benchley, Thurber, and S. J. Perelman. Consider, for example, this paragraph from “A Look at Organized Crime”:

In 1921, Thomas (The Butcher) Covello and Ciro (The Tailor) Santucci attempted to organize disparate ethnic groups of the underworld and thus take over Chicago. This was foiled when Albert (The Logical Positivist) Corillo assassinated Kid Lipsky by locking him in a closet and sucking all the air out through a straw.

On its most important, most recognizable level, Allen's fun is at the expense of what had been a popular television show—*The Untouchables*—and the spate of books about the Mob it inspired; on other fronts, he cannot quite resist the impulse to juxtapose nicknames we expect with ones we don't. But there is also the Allen who knows the traditions of American humor as inti-

mately as he knows the trendy stuff of popular culture. In this case, the story of Kid Lipsky's comic rubout is lifted from the *New Yorker's* pages rather than from the TV screen, and those who knew Allen from his days as a Greenwich Village comic may well have missed the allusion as well as part of Allen's humorous point. By way of illustration, I offer the following:

Then there was Aunt Sarah Shoaf, who never went to bed at night without the fear that a burglar was going to get in and blow chloroform under her door through a tube. To avert this calamity—for she was in greater dread of anesthetics than of losing her household goods—she always piled her money, silverware, and other valuables in a neat stack just outside her bedroom, with a note reading: “This is all I have. Please take it and do not use your chloroform, as this is all I have.”

Aunt Sarah Shoaf is, of course, one of the lovable eccentrics who made James Thurber's childhood in Columbus, Ohio, so ripe for the *New Yorker's* picking. Granted, Allen dusts off Thurber's material, gives it an appropriately urban—which is to say, “hip”—twist, but the essential archetype had been around for a long, long time. As Thurber himself once put it, for the person beating his or her brains out trying to write a two-thousand-word comic sketch, there was always “the suspicion that a piece he has been working on for two long days was done much better and probably more quickly by Robert Benchley in 1924.”⁴

Like Benchley, like Thurber, like Perelman, Allen cannot recount his complicated griefs without making them seem comic. But that said, Allen also has certain advantages that they lacked. He plays, in short, to a hipper house, one that Allen himself describes as belonging to those “born after Nietzsche's edict that ‘God is dead,’ but before the hit recording [by the Beatles] ‘I Wanna Hold Your Hand.’” Moreover, Allen broke in his version of the sad-sack-as-schlemiel at a cultural moment when ethnicity was becoming a box-office plus rather than the marginal minus it had always been considered. If radio tended to obliterate regional dialects, homogenizing our speech until the diction of CBS announcers became the American equivalent of the Queen's English, then movies (and later, television) turned a country of small towns into a nation of urban states.

Granted, the process I'm alluding to happened so slowly, so subtly, that it defies precise dating. Nor is the greater receptiveness and more hospitable climate that resulted limited to Woody Allen. If one thinks of, say, Henry Roth, what cluster of events occasioned the 1964 revival, and the subsequent popularity, of *Call It Sleep* (1934), his lyrical novel about growing up amid the squalor and the terrors of New York's immigrant Lower East Side? One would *like* to give the obvious answer—namely, that it's a first-rate book that had been unfairly ignored—but accounting for popular taste is more

complicated. Often, timing counts for at least as much as talent. Without a different literary context that now included the work of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and another Roth named Philip; without a cultural moment in which you didn't have to be Jewish to enjoy Levy's rye bread or to know a few Yiddish words; without, in short, the 1960s as they were. Henry Roth's novel might have continued its long, uninterrupted sleep. Similarly, after Benchley and even after Chaplin's comedies, films as aggressively ethnic as *Annie Hall* (1977), *Manhattan* (1979), or *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) would have been impossible in the 1930s.

Roughly the same cultural changes affected what a stand-up comic could, or could not, do behind a mike. Lenny Bruce is usually mentioned in this connection. His daring—some would say sacrificial—campaign on behalf of liberating language from the unspoken taboos that made four-letter words a nightclub no-no, and of addressing formerly forbidden subjects (not only sex but also race and religion) is, of course, part of the 1960s story. But so too is Woody Allen. His public therapy sessions (conducted, for the most part, in Greenwich Village nightclubs) cast Allen as the analysand and the audience as his analyst. The result—as the comedy albums he recorded during the early 1960s attest—was very funny stuff indeed, and Allen mined the best gags for subsequent *New Yorker* sketches and films.

As the Allen persona would proudly “boast,” he was weaker, more troubled, and infinitely more sensitive than anybody in the house. Given the age and its anxieties, if Woody Allen hadn't bumbled along with his brand of urban Jewish neurosis, his thick eyeglasses, his sad face, somebody else would surely have invented him. The era of the borscht belt gag (e.g., “I spent a thousand dollars to have my nose fixed, and now my brain won't work” [*bup bup bup*]) was over. That world—which Allen resurrects as the chorus of older comics who hang around the Carnegie Deli swapping stories about characters like Broadway Danny Rose—may have cracked up Aunt Sadie, but not her nephews. By contrast, Allen's characteristic shrugs and quivers, his obsessive worries and pervasive guilts, his hesitant pauses and equally tentative voice, were just right for the *Playboy* crowd. To them Allen could confess, “I don't believe in an afterlife, although I plan to bring a change of underwear.” Or he would offer his remembrances of neuroses past: “When we played softball, I'd steal second, then feel guilty and go back.” As one critic of the Village scene during those days recalls it, “The futzing around Allen did onstage was the gestalt of a comedic antihero . . . true neurotica.”⁵

Very soon, however, Allen's onstage futzing became the trademark of his on-screen persona. He projected aspects of himself as weakling, as klutz, and most often, as schlemiel. Consider, for example, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), in which the story of Virgil Starkwell contains all three. As a parody of both the documentary (with its efforts to “explain,” via sociopsychology,

how a criminal like Starkwell comes into being) and the prison film—with its tough cons and daring, stylized escapes—Allen proves himself a resourceful enough counterpuncher to last through the film's eighty-five minutes.

But gags alone—even very good ones—will not a feature film make. What gives *Take the Money and Run* its durability is certain moments of what can only be called comic genius. It is, after all, one thing to hear the documentary's "narrator" (Jackson Beck) tell us in sonorous voice-over that Virgil Starkwell grew up in tough circumstances, bullied by older, stronger toughs, and then see a pint-sized version of the bespectacled Allen watch, helpless, as they break his glasses and smash the remains into bits; and quite another to hear the testimony of Virgil's first cello teacher—the low-key but exasperated Mr. Turgson. As he tells his reminiscences to the camera, we learn that Virgil loved the cello, indeed, that he stole money to pay for lessons, but we also find out that, in Mr. Turgson's words, he "had no conception of the instrument. He *blew* into it."

However (the voice-over informs us), if Virgil did not become a great cello player, he at least became proficient enough to join a local band. At this point, Allen moves beyond mere futzing to a piece of brilliant screen business: a marching band makes its way down the street with everything in apple-pie order—drum major, assorted brass, the whole Sousa entourage—when suddenly we see Allen sawing away on his cello and frantically trying to keep pace with other members of the band by moving a chair and then sitting down to crank out a few bars. Like Chaplin before him, Allen knows how to translate a funny premise into physical humor. Granted, parodic energy accounts for some of the success (e.g., the dry, slightly off narrative tone that sets the scene), but what makes the scene really work is Virgil's capacity to build in his own defeats. Here, in short, is the schlemiel in one of his most traditional incarnations—namely, as the man who unwittingly sets comic disaster into motion.

In other sections of *Take the Money and Run*, Allen is content to play Virgil as the klutz—for example, as a would-be pool hustler who (predictably enough) ruins the felt, misses his shots, and ends up shelling out money or as a would-be sneak thief who gets his hand caught in the gum ball machine. Virgil, in short, has all the earmarks of the typical Allen loser; he is too frail, too isolated, too alienated, and of course, too sensitive to make it here. Even the army rejects him when he identifies an ink blot as "two elephants making love to a men's glee club."

Not surprisingly, Virgil is equally inept as a criminal, but less because he is klutzy than because he is an inveterate schlemiel. Those who remember Willie Sutton (the man who once explained that he robbed banks because "that's where the money was" and who once escaped from prison by fashioning a gun out of a soap bar) take a special pleasure in the scene in which Virgil reenacts Sutton's bust out. There is Virgil in his cell, patiently carving

a gun from a bar of soap and then applying black shoe polish for the realistic finishing touch. It can't miss—and indeed, for a while it doesn't. Virgil takes several guards hostage and makes his way into the Big Yard—only to be caught in a sudden shower that reduces his “pistol” to a handful of soap bubbles. Build in possibilities for disaster, and disaster will surely overtake you—this is the essential message of tragedy and also of Allen's most representative comedy. As Shechner points out, Allen has been “a closet tragedian all along” and

the air of cosmic befuddlement that now colors his thought was there from the first. He has taken to telling interviewers, “My real obsessions are religious,” and “Death is the big obsession behind all I've done,” and “The metaphor for life is a concentration camp, do believe that.” This last, he told *Time* magazine after *Manhattan* was released, was a line he had cut from that film but intended to use in his next. And despite efforts on Allen's part to keep *Manhattan* from drowning, as *Interiors* did, in too metaphysical a view of the modern condition, the void sneaks inexorably in. So, when Isaac Davis (Allen) and Mary (Diane Keaton) take refuge from a storm in Hayden Planetarium and conduct a flirtatious tête-à-tête amid lunar and nebular skylines, Allen, as director, is not just having fun with his sets, he's also reminding us that “We're lost out there in the stars.”

Given the concerted movement *away* from metaphysical angst in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)—a film that finally insists that the comic beauties of a Marx brothers' film like *Duck Soup* have a right to be, without introspection, without brooding, without metaphysical whining—Shechner might want to amend his original assessment, but I think that his general sense of Allen is on target. Even the scene from *Take the Money and Run* where Virgil botches a bank robbery because of poor penmanship (the teller has difficulty reading his note, insisting that it says “I have a *gub*”) has a downside that is both tragic and, if you will, “metaphysical.” To be sure, that Virgil creates so much trouble for himself (“*Act natural*” comes out looking like “*Act natural*”) is the stuff that schlemiels are made of. But poor Virgil is also caught in a world—as are we all—in which one of the vice presidents must counter-sign a holdup note before tellers are authorized to give out cash, and where discussions and decisions are increasingly made by committee. As Allen escalates the scene's pacing, Virgil finds himself awash in what literary theoreticians call “reader response”—each with an opinion and each with something like a vote. Moreover, bureaucracy exerts a power—at least over the timid—that far outstrips that of the criminal. His gun reduced to a “gub,” Allen's protagonist watches helplessly as he is gradually reduced to the state of childhood (where neatness counts and teachers know how to deal with the sloppy) and the police at last arrive.

One could argue that Virgil is in the wrong business, that he simply

doesn't have either sufficient talent or sufficient calling to be a thief. The same thing, interestingly enough, could be said of Broadway Danny Rose's equally fatal attraction to marginal entertainers. As an agent Danny Rose has collected a veritable menagerie of bizarre acts: a one-armed juggler, a one-legged tap dancer, a woman who belts out eerie tunes by waving her hand over glasses filled with water. Nonetheless, Broadway Danny Rose believes in his clients, cares for them in ways that go well beyond the call of duty, and of course pitches them whenever and wherever he can. This despite the fact that those who *do* make it abandon him without so much as a by-your-leave, despite the fact that he is a marginal man in what can only be described as a marginal business.

As the kibitzers in the Carnegie Deli (including such actual veterans of the borscht belt circuit such as Jackie Gayle, Corbett Monica, and Will Jordan) conjure up both Broadway Danny Rose and the bygone age of showbiz he represents, the focus narrows to what happened when Lou Canova (Nick Apollo Forte), a saloon singer in the Sinatra mold, began his comeback, fueled by the rerelease of his one authentic 1950s hit, the nostalgia craze, and Broadway Danny Rose's willing, but ineffectual, direction.

In *Broadway Danny Rose*, Canova gives us one version that *All For Love* can take in the contemporary world (Canova pursues the wonderfully tawdry Tina Vitale [played to comic perfection by Mia Farrow] as Broadway Danny Rose chases after him, tsk-tsking all the way), but in most of Allen's films the role of erstwhile lover is reserved for Allen himself. Generally speaking, the earlier films are manned by sexual bumblers, by little boys in grown-up clothing, by those who strike us as longer on boast than on performance. Virgil Starkwell is a typical case. He may insist (as Allen himself did during his days as a stand-up) that the proper answer to the question, "Is sex dirty?" can only be, "It is . . . if you're doing it right," but the gap between quip and condition is so great that even calling it an incongruity doesn't quite do it justice.

Much the same thing is true of, say, the Fielding Mellish (Woody Allen) of *Bananas* (1971) although, this time, the making of the Allen schlemiel *is* more developed, more sustained. Mellish is more than a timid products tester mauled by an exercising contraption for busy executives called Excusizer (shades of Chaplin's losing battle with machines in *Modern Times*), he is also a portrait of a Brooklyn intellectual as a sexual-political loser, the man whose fortunes rise and fall in volatile San Marcos (a banana republic that produces more revolutionaries than tropical fruit) and whose wedding night is covered—by none other than Howard Cosell himself—on *Wide World of Sports*. If the plotline of *Bananas* is, shall we say, loose, it allows plenty of room for Allen's spontaneous energy.

By contrast, when his films moved beyond the limitations of mere parody (e.g., *Sleeper* [the sci-fi flick]; *Love and Death* [the Russian novel]; *Every-*

thing You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask) [the Dr. David Reuben best seller]). Allen's filmmaking became increasingly reflexive, that is, focused as much on the medium as on the message. Granted, the Allen persona remained in occupancy, still nervous, still a loser, still every bit the schlemiel, but there were also subtle wrinkles added to his by-now recognizable features. For example, one traditional synonym for *schlemiel* was *cuckold*, but in a film like *Play It Again, Sam* (largely concerned with how a film buff and inveterate sad sack is finally able to transfer *Casablanca's* images into action), it is Allan Felix (Woody Allen) who cuckolds the worldly Dick Christie (Tony Roberts). And in *Annie Hall*, the tale's bittersweet unfolding depends as much upon Alvy Singer's lovability as upon his loserhood. As Irving Howe points out, the humor of schlemielhood can take savage turns (as it does in the routines of Lenny Bruce) or tender ones. Not surprisingly, Howe numbers Allen among the latter:

Woody Allen was a reincarnated Menashe Skulnik, quintessential *schlemiel* of the Yiddish theatre, but now a college graduate acquainted with the thought of Freud and recent numbers of *Commentary*. . . . [He] exploited the parochial helplessness of Jewish sons, their feelings of sexual feebleness and worldly incapacity; but he did this with an undertone of wistfulness and affection that marked him off from most other Jewish comedians of his moment.⁶

No doubt there are those who would point out that Allen, tenderhearted though his personae might be, is hardly above dragging in bearded Hasidic Jews whenever he wants an easy laugh (indeed, earlocks and broad black hats have been paraded through Allen's films since the days of *Take the Money and Run*, and always for their value as a quick visual gag) and others who might argue that *Stardust Memories*—its parody on Fellini films notwithstanding—is, at bottom, a mean-spirited affair. Fortunately, the sour note one often finds creeping through the humorist's mask (e.g., Dorothy Parker, Ring Lardner, Don Marquis, James Thurber, and most especially Mark Twain) has not lingered long enough to produce a string of *Stardust Memories* sequels.

Nonetheless, given the Allen who continues to plug away at serious, Bergman-like efforts such as *Interiors* or *September*, one cannot entirely discount the possibility of yet another Allen film justifying his decision *not* to remake his earlier comedies ad infinitum. As those before Allen discovered, humorists live so long under the lesser shadows of writing light verse or of providing comic relief—in short, of not being considered *serious*—that they learn more about the ambivalent nature of contempt than is probably good for them. In *The World According to Garp* (1978), John Irving's narrator explains the situation this way:

Why did people insist that if you were "comic" you couldn't also be "serious"? Garp felt most people confused being profound with being sober, being earnest

with being deep. Apparently, if you *sounded* serious, you were. Presumably, other animals could not laugh at themselves, and Garp believed that laughter was related to sympathy, which we were always needing more of. He had been, after all, a humorless child—and never religious—so perhaps he now took comedy more seriously than others.

However, I hasten to point out that Garp's arguments (most of which Woody Allen would second) do not convince the Mrs. Poole who had written an antifan letter accusing him, among other things, of laughing "at people who can't have orgasms, and people who aren't blessed with happy marriages, and people whose wives and husbands are unfaithful." The comic exchange ends, as it must, with Garp's final letter (in what turns out to be a pointless, frustrating exchange on both sides) and with this particular argument's bottom line: "Fuck you."

Stardust Memories has something of the same message for those, including God, who keep urging Sandy Bates (Woody Allen) to make funnier films, to tell funnier jokes, to replay it all again, Sandy. Small wonder that Bates turns testy and self-conscious. As he would have it, aggravation is everybody else. Others get in the way, complicate things, misunderstand, whatever—but you can't make films without them.

And *that*, of course, is the point about *Stardust Memories*. It is about the making of itself. Rather than a film that holds a mirror up to the cosmos, to a universe that riddles us with deaths that come too soon and loves that do not come at all, this time Woody Allen points his looking glass at the silver screen itself. In the concluding moments of the film the entire cast assembles in the rickety auditorium that has been the locale for the weekend's Sandy Bates retrospective, and they watch the film we have ourselves just watched. They file out full of wonderment and praise. Bates is a comic genius, they exclaim in unison, but we know better than to trust people on the payroll. After all, the film has bashed into senselessness those who might raise any objections. Besides, this film is *not* akin to the early Bates; rather, it points toward similarly reflexive moments in films such as *The Purple Rose of Cairo* or *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

In the final frame of *Stardust Memories*, Sandy Bates's quizzical face is fixed on the blank screen and the empty auditorium. Two unformed questions spread across his face: Was the film any good? Does it matter, one way or the other? Perhaps those are *always* the essential questions, but artists cannot overworry them and still remain artists. In Allen's case, working conditions unmatched in the American film industry have allowed him plenty of elbow room to play his hunches. *He* cannot say of Sandy Bates what Flaubert said of Madame Bovary—namely, "C'est moi!" Rather, Woody Allen is a case of Blakean persistence rewarded, of a person pursuing his neuroses until they become the very stuff of Art—an art, by the way, that included

not only the Manhattan haunts that have become Allen's equivalent of Faulkner's "postage stamp of native soil" and the gallery of introspective, nervous schlemiels he has added to our stock of mental images, but also the generous doses of humanity that infuse his work with love as well as lovability. As to Sandy Bates's questions, it is fair to say that the jury is no longer out about Woody Allen, despite his being still very much in midcareer and showing no signs of either slowing down or standing still: his films *are* good and they *do* matter.

NOTES

1. Mark Shechner, "Woody Allen: The Failure of the Therapeutic," in *From Hester Street to Hollywood*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen, 232 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983). Subsequent references to Shechner are to this seminal important article.

2. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 146.

3. Bloom is quick to point out that Bruno Bettelheim's cameo appearance as one of Zelig's "witnesses" is further evidence of the Germanic strain in Allen's thought. What Bloom quite misses, however, is the marvelous self-parodies that intellectuals such as Irving Howe, Susan Sontag, and ironically enough, Saul Bellow (Bloom's colleague and friend at the University of Chicago) contribute to Allen's pseudodocumentary.

4. James Thurber, *The Thurber Carnival* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945), 175.

5. Phil Berger, *The Last Laugh* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 114.

6. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 571.