

Woody's latest flick

# Allen's Purple Rose spins magic



**The Purple Rose of Cairo**  
Orion Pictures  
Plaza

review by Ross Crockford

Mia Farrow is Cecilia, a waitress in a greasy New Jersey cafe during the Depression. Her boss shouts at her. She breaks dishes. At home, her philandering, unemployed husband sponges off her and then blows it on booze and craps. But one day, into the middle of this, a man of her simple dreams appears: Tom Baxter, ("of the Chicago Baxters; poet, adveturer and explorer" he announces.)

Cecilia's problem is that he isn't real — he's a character in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, a romantic adventure flick she continually escapes to. No matter; her love does not go unrequited for long. As she is seeing the film for the sixth time, in the middle of a speech she knows by heart, Tom suddenly turns and speaks to her — and he steps out of the screen to meet her. Movie-goers (not the Edmontonian ones) scream and faint and Tom and Cecilia run out a side exit and into the "Real World". Their goal is to try and bridge the now-muddled separation between what is and what should be. (As a

movie studio executive later screams, "What a mess! The real ones want their lives fictional, and the fictional ones want their lives real!") Woody Allen's new movie, then, is not only like an excerpt of Marquez; it's a crash course in epistemology.

So what happened to the brooding cynic who gave us *Interiors* and *Stardust Memories*? He's still lurking around Woody's set, but fortunately for us (and, I suspect, himself), Woody has learned that if he's going to feed us bitter philosophy, he's got to sugarcoat it first. He might consider it a curse to be regarded only as a comic — but comedy is where his roots lie. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Woody doesn't forget his roots.

It's a pretty funny movie, but not uproariously so; there's little room for the slapstick that was in *Broadway Danny Rose* or in Woody's earlier films. Most of its gags are verbal, usually coming from Jeff Daniels, who plays both Baxter and Gil Shepherd. (To clarify: Daniels plays Shepherd who plays Baxter.)

*The Purple Rose of Cairo* is technically good, too. Woody and Director of Photography Gordon Willis nicely recreate the glitzy look and feel of '30's movies — which is important, because it helps us forget some of the inconsistencies of the film within the film that Woody uses to carry his story along (Why can Baxter step out of the screen, but no one else?). Still, Woody deserves credit for using the film within the film to explore possibilities of actions and ideas which probably would have been left untouched by a lesser writer. After Baxter escapes, for example, the distraught characters left on the screen argue with the theater-goers (again, not the Edmontonian ones) about the purpose of their film — an ingeniously funny exchange.

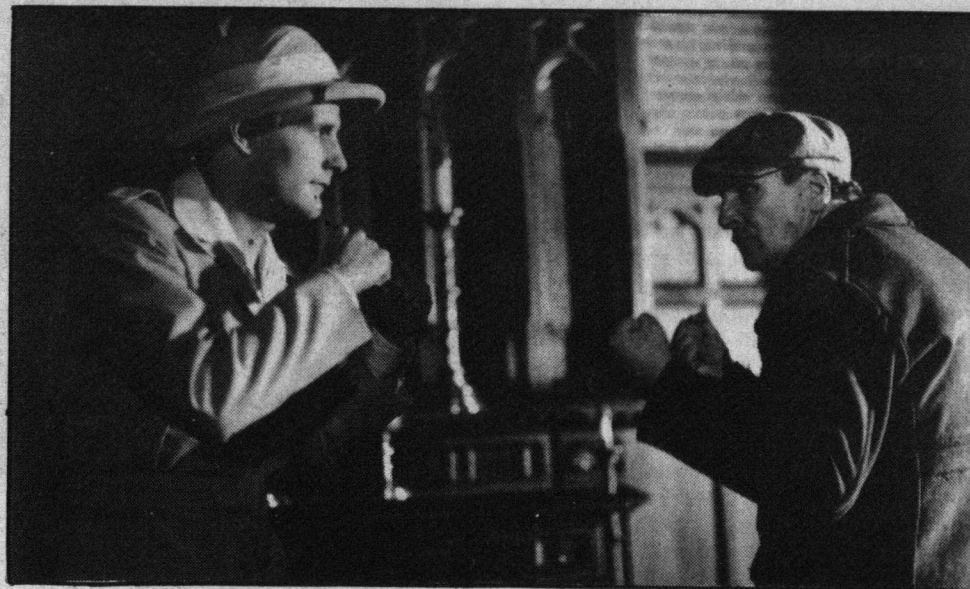
The gist of all this is that *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is a curious litmus test for how an audience approaches movies: it can be regarded as an essay on self-referential filmmaking, or a strange version of the simple

romantic films Woody seems to satirize. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* reminds us of the strange, hypnotic magic of films — it is full of much of this magic itself — but tries to subvert it at the same time. It continually reminds us, "this is only a movie."

In fact, Woody seems intensely critical of people who, like *Star Wars* junkies, escape into theatres to try to recreate the same happy experiences and forget about what's "real". At one point, Baxter is lured into a bordello. He's completely innocent of prostitution; he can only rhapsodize to the whores about his new-found world. "I stand in awe of existence!" he cries — to which one woman replies, "Do you want to tie me up?" Still, Woody treats his characters with such tenderness (especially Cecilia) that it's hard to believe he really wants to criticize any of them. Even the prostitute, confused, then impressed by Baxter's purity and devotion to

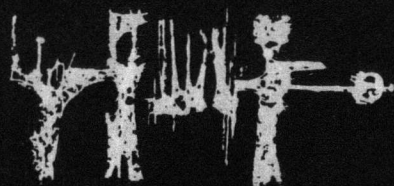
Cecilia, carefully, hopefully asks, "Are there any more of you out there?" Everybody has a dream in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*; Woody never makes the insensitive mistake, as he did in *Interiors* or *Stardust Memories*, of forgetting those dreams, of regarding his characters as only means to a thematic end.

The fact is, if there is anyone Woody really wants to unsettle, its movie critics. Analyzing, even thinking about *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is like swimming in quicksand; the harder you try, the faster you sink. It's hard to tell whether this uncertainty is intentional, or only the result of Woody's own confusion — and it makes little difference. If there is any "message" in this film, it's to try not to think too much — in other words, not to look for messages. The only secure statement one can make about *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is that it's worth seeing, regardless of the reasons one escapes into movie theatres.



ABOVE Jeff Daniels (at left) and Danny Aiello: Bridging the muddled separation between what is and what should be.

TOP LEFT Mia Farrow: Depression-style waitress



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