

Zelig: Adapta-identity

by Ronald Macdonald

To paraphrase Woody Allen parodying Gertrude Stein pontificating upon Ernest Hemingway, "Woody Allen's new movie is a good movie, but not a great movie." It is not great like "Annie Hall," "Manhattan" or "Sleeper." It is, however, a great idea for a film. Unfortunately, great ideas don't often translate into great cinema.

Zelig reveals a Woody Allen cleverly manipulating several forms of cinematic presentation to produce a bogus documentary that suggests a sendup of Warren Beatty's "Reds" while addressing the theme of the loss of identity in the modern age.

Set in the 'Jazz Age' 1920's New York, much of the film consists of altered still photographs and newsreel footage. There is not much acting (by conventional standards) and the narrative is delivered by some authoritative-sounding voice with a slight English accent (for legitimacy, I suppose). There's even a discernable plot, making this bit of imaginative false history continuously interesting, sort of like the "Pitdown Man" in reverse.

The story itself is about one

Leonard Zelig (Woody Allen), a man who can adapt himself to any identity that happens to be nearby at that particular moment. He becomes a phenomenon, a veritable one man *National Enquirer*. Songs are written about him, pictures are taken of him with all the important personalities of the day, and he is much in demand at society functions.

Zelig comes to the attention of a psychiatrist (Mia Farrow) who heroically attempts to bring out the few identifiably human characteristics hiding behind Zelig's adaptable mask. In the process both become national heroes.

Admittedly this all sounds rather predictable. What makes "Zelig" different is the unorthodox presentation and rapid pacing. No longer does Woody Allen pay homage to Bergman's snooze-a-thons, and the slavish tribute to Fellini in "Stardust Memories" may have been good therapy for him but it was no fun for us.

Which brings us to the central problem of Woody Allen's career: his own identity as filmmaker/persona/satirist/huckster, etc.

All through the seventies our



hero has suffered the slings and arrows of that most awful of moral dilemmas, success. Not only did he write and direct the funniest, most biting and most touching comedies of the 1970's, he absolutely *had* to star in all of them. Furthermore, he had the most beautiful and talented actresses at his beck and call.

Was he satisfied with Louise Lasser, Diane Keaton, Meryl Streep and all that acclaim? Of course not. He obviously got tired of making a fool of himself and decided to make fools of his adoring public instead. The whining nebbish persona began to sour around the middle of "Manhattan." No longer were gorgeous women driving him crazy. Now it was his adoring public. "Stardust Memories" made mincemeat of us, and consequently we made mincemeat of it.

Come back Woody, all is forgiven. Last summer's "Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy" was a finely scripted diversion, with the nebbish persona held well in check by Mia Farrow and Jose Ferrer. *Zelig*, however, is an indication that Woody Allen is aware of his own tediousness. In fact, it's a bit of a cinematic pun: Zelig has no identity at all, and all the psychobabble, so pertinent in his great movies, is all automatically dated by the gulf of history.

The fact that Allen is addressing the great issue of the modern age doesn't keep him from getting lots of cheap laughs at the expense of 1920's society. There's lots of room for oneupmanship by identifying all the historical figures (F. Scott Fitzgerald and Fanny Brice among others) while Susan Sontag and Saul Bellow pontificate from the present. Why, you could spend the entire movie naming names and pretending you're in New York.

Perhaps this is Woody Allen's way of giving the people what they want, after all, it's not likely we'll see him in outer space. Then again, how does "Woody Allen in the Temple of Death" sound to you?

Bergman's bizarre dream of childhood

by Siobhan McRae

Ingmar Bergman's latest film, "Fanny and Alexander," is a beautiful but disturbing spectacle. The settings are lavish, the characters peculiar, and much of the action wavers between a fairy tale and a horror story. This is life in Sweden at the turn of the century as viewed through the eyes of a young boy.

Alexander is a strange little boy and no doubt he is at least partially modelled on Bergman's own childhood memories. The movie opens with the boy playing with an arrangement of cardboard figures and it's up to the viewer to decide how much of the action that follows is Alexander playing on a larger scale. He is such a fey individual that we can never be certain where reality ends and his vivid imagination takes over.

Fanny is Alexander's younger sister and although she is with him through most of his experiences she doesn't seem to view them the same way. For Alexander, everyday life seems to be a bizarre and often frightening experience filled with ghosts, magic, violence and extremes of joy and terror, prodigality and austerity. It is a world of unsettling adult figures; on one level they seem to be superficial stereotypes while on another level they are full of baffling contradictions.

For the first part of the film the audience is treated to a dazzling display of the type of Christmas a wealthy Swedish family could

expect to have. The pageantry and opulence are awe-inspiring, but there is a darker side to the fairy tale. One of Alexander's uncles is a hopeless sort of character; despicable and desperate. Alexander's father has overworked himself as manager of a theatre and he dies soon after Christmas.

The plot takes a Dickensian turn when Alexander's mother marries a harsh and strict bishop who compels her to move with her children to his prison-like home peopled with dour and malevolent characters. Here the fairy tale element intrudes with the typical wicked and cruel stepfather and an eventual unlikely escape.

What follows takes on the aspect of a horror story as Alexander goes through some weird and supernatural experiences with violent results. The film then moves back to the grand style on which it began, ending on a supposedly happy note that somehow seems false or at least superficial. Alexander and his mother have gone through difficult and bizarre experiences and yet seem to have emerged unscathed both physically and emotionally.

If you want some light entertainment with a lot of action and a clear storyline "Fanny and Alexander" is not the movie for you. But if you want a visual feast that will leave you with a series of puzzling yet intriguing images, you will certainly get your money's worth from Bergman's latest work.

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