

King of American comedy delivers self-conscious winner

The Purple Rose of Cairo
directed by Woody Allen (God)
starring Mia Farrow, Jeff Daniels

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Though he has dominated American film comedy for at least the last decade, Woody Allen has somehow remained outside the American film establishment, an autonomous institution, refusing to pay even the slightest attention to the numerous critics who insist that they know better than he about what he should be doing with his talent.

Critical studies of Allen (the best ones) explain the frequently hostile reviews of Allen's work in terms of his early comic success. The all pervasive on-screen image of Woody as the lovable, self-obsessed, neurotic intellectual, established him as a cultural archetype introduced and developed in a series of classics derived from personal experience.

With the popular and artistic success of *Annie Hall* (1977), however, Allen understandably believed he had taken the personalized form to its logical conclusion and was anxious to move on to new ground. But the public and the critics didn't want it to happen. Despite its artistic power, *Interiors* (1978) was seen by many critics as a betrayal, and since that time only the technical genius of *Zelig* (1983), the light comedy of *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), and last year's *Broadway Danny Rose* have garnered him any widespread attention. *Manhattan* (1979), a film some consider to be his masterpiece, was largely ignored by critics because of its tragic suggestions. *Stardust Memories* was attacked on the basis of a misguided belief that Allen was attacking his own fans, while only the undeniable brilliance of *Zelig* preserved it from a similar fate.

Yet *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Allen's new film, will be very difficult to ignore. Leaving behind the familiar safety of last year's *Broadway Danny Rose*, Allen has once again taken a major risk, once again succeeded, and what's more, he has done so in such a way as to leave himself beyond the reach of even his most demanding critics.

In the first place, Allen has removed himself completely from the onscreen happenings, producing his first film since *Interiors* in which he himself does not appear. Difficulties the viewer might have with the old Woody are eliminated by removing the familiar image, leaving Allen free to explore new ground from a



Woody Allen (pictured here in *Zelig*), has become a minor deity when compared to other American film comedians. His new film continues his tradition of excellence.

purely directorial perspective. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is in some ways even more ambitious than *Zelig*; again using stylized mimicry of thirties' black and white films, but this time for a different purpose.

The new film replaces the thematic self-consciousness of Allen's earlier work with a self-consciousness that focuses on form, and a nostalgic awareness of film history. The film opens with a beautifully stylized, color update of a 1930s' film,

with Mia Farrow as the familiar restaurant waitress, (Celia) supporting her no-good husband. To escape the bitter realities of depression-era Chicago, Celia spends almost all her evenings in the cinema, frequently watching the same film several times over. In her first visit to the theatre we are greeted with a black and white sequence from Allen's internal Thirties parodies, which we watch with Celia from a seat in the cinema. It is only on her umpteenth trip to see the same movie that the impossible happens; a character on screen suddenly turns away from the established scene and begins to speak to Celia. In short order he has walked out on his irate co-actors and wandered into the realm of the living, changing poor Celia's life as he does so.

Although some of the artistic relationships that are explored in the film are as deep as any from the self-conscious tradition in which Allen is working, Allen tempers, even subdues the intellectualism in favor of slapstick and light comedy. For a film as concerned as this one is with the relationship between reality and fiction, the artist and his creation, it is astoundingly accessible. Instead of being alienated by the intellectual argument, the audience can delight in its inherent silliness.

On the other side of the coin, basic slapstick and one-liner humor is redeemed beautifully by the complexity of the form, and the whole exercise begins very much to resemble a multi-levelled version of Allen's familiar *reductio ad absurdum*, this time applied to a Pirandello-like comedy. Allen's directorial decisions are almost universally superb, and betray an underlying self-awareness that is perhaps unparalleled in his earlier work. As a writer, Allen has met his self-imposed challenge with stunning comic skill, while from a directorial standpoint, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* is perhaps his most complete success to date. For a work which eliminates his on-screen presence, the new film evokes an uncanny sense of the writer's personality, and while Allen's direction is of paramount importance, the flawless performance of Mia Farrow and Jeff Daniels are essential to the film's overall success. Though at first glance the acting is not as visibly important as formal considerations, Farrow and Daniels have made what are very difficult, stylized roles appear easy.

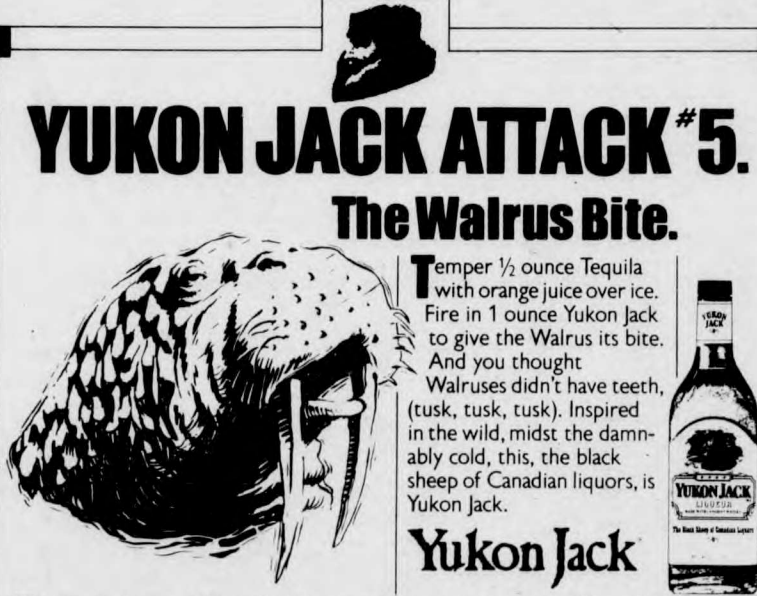
In such a balanced and well-conceived effort the viewer is constantly aware of the fact that Allen is miles above any of his contemporaries, and is building steadily on a series of film achievements that will one day place him in the company of Groucho Marx, Chaplin and W.C. Fields. In terms of filmmaking, he must be regarded as North America's most recent comic genius, extending the boundaries and exploring the possibilities of film comedy like none of his peers.

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2. Does Pierre Berton have a real job? If so, what?
3. Match the singer to his or her major achievement

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| a) Anne Murray | a) A Juno Award |
| b) Bryan Adams | |
| c) Gordon Lightfoot | |
4. Which of these television personalities has not appeared with the Stratford Festival?

| |
|--------------------|
| a) William Shatner |
| b) Bruno Gerussi |
| c) Larry Mann |
| d) Martin Yan |



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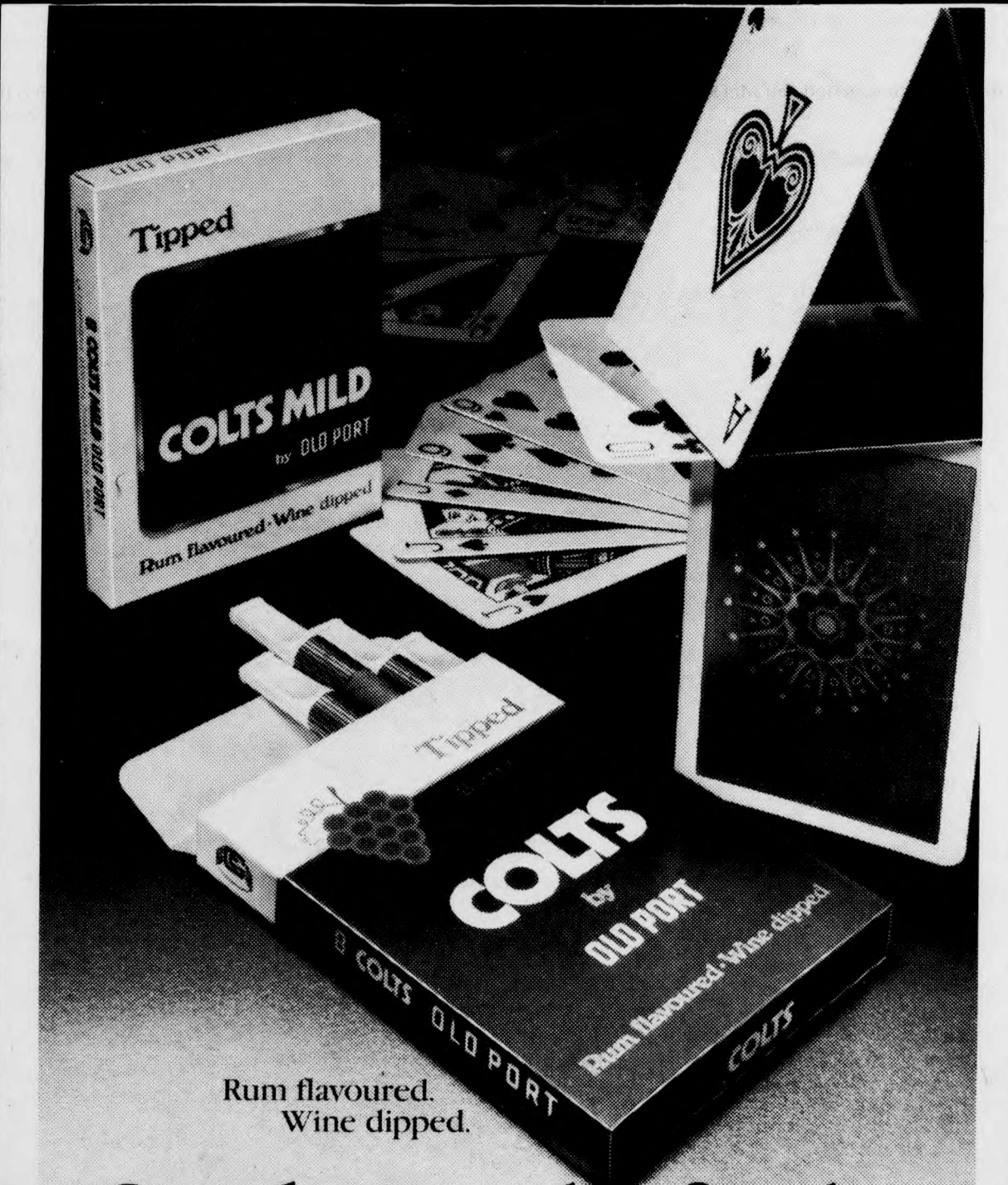
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