

The frustration of laughter

by Michael McCarthy

Imaginative, direct, honest, and funny—Woody Allen's latest film *Stardust Memories* comes very close to the meld of a serious treatment of important human issues with natural, uncontrived humour which he has been struggling for in his last few efforts. It is a more personal film than any he has made so far; he plays a character that must be very close to himself, and does not hide behind his humour, but lets it flow freely and unforced in those situations which are naturally humorous. There is more serious material than funny, however, and most of the humour arises from the inanities of the people who are glorifying Allen beyond all reason, who are trying to get something from him, play up to him, or force him to make a movie he doesn't want to make anymore—a straight comedy.

Hence, we can no longer laugh just at bizarre Woody; we must laugh at ourselves, if we want to laugh at all—which may not enhance the movie's popularity. Nonetheless, this is an excellent, well-crafted film. The script is incisive and erudite, the scenes are cleverly stitched together, even when they are not chronological (which happens frequently), or even all "real" (since there is a movie within the movie). The acting is good, sometimes excellent. The subject matter is far-reaching, exploring the responsibilities of living, the frustrations of trying to cope with them, and the ridiculousness of the whole situation anyway.

Allen plays a film-maker renowned for his comedies, who no longer wants to make funny movies. He sees the

suffering and tragedy in the world, and wants to contribute something worthwhile to their alleviation. Those around him, however, are looking for shallow, meaningless escapism and the big bucks that replication of past successes can bring. Besides trying to cope with his professional and artistic aspirations, he must decide whether or not to cement a personal relationship; to opt for practicality or



passion and uncertainty. Constantly, while endeavouring to resolve these immense personal and philosophical issues, he is surrounded by a circus of movie executives, film groupies, autograph seekers, moronic self-styled intellectuals, ambitious actors and screenwriters, and generally large throngs who have no perception of reality and don't want any.

The humour is still there, of

course. The very intensity of the problems become funny; but this in itself is tragic, which is amusing. Everything is interrelated. However, Allen sees no way out of the dilemma. He decides at the end that he is asking unanswerable questions, or at least, the wrong ones, (according to a UFO alien, who should know). The movie in the movie ends with Allen's character deciding to ease up, enjoy some good times, and life will be easier. The audience leaves the theatre (in the movie), but Allen comes back, looking for something. He finds his dark glasses, and puts them on (replacing the mask he took off during the movie). He looks at the empty screen, as if there should be something more, then exists (presumably to try again) and the movie fades out.

This movie is very subjective, but most of the subjective issues are faced by all of us (although I think Allen harps too much on his relationships with gorgeous women, apparently an ego trip for him). It was in black and white, like his last film, but this time I think it succeeded in focusing more attention on the intellectual content of the film than would have been the case if it had been in colour with more visual distractment/escapism. Although mentally challenging, unevenly paced and occasionally too indulgent, the sincerity with which Allen states his case makes the movie very palatable. I would think that the combination of reality and the always sharp, cynical and amusing Allen humour should be satisfactory enough to make his fans accept this genre and stop asking for reruns of what he's done before.

The ceremony — a second review

by Karl Weber

"Do you know where this delicious apple comes from?", a Japanese teacher asked his students in an elementary school. "Manchuria", the students replied. "Yes. So if you want to eat this kind of apple", said the teacher solemnly, "go to China's Manchuria when you grow up." The Japanese remember their teacher's words — in 1920 they went to China and occupied Manchuria. The glorious dream almost came true, the dream that "should Japan plan to conquer the world, she must conquer China first; should Japan plan to conquer China, she must conquer Manchuria first."

In the belief that the Japanese are the best nation in the world, and that it would only take three months to ruin China, young soldiers marching on the way to China inaugurated the ceremony of

lasted for fourteen years. Everything was going well, except for one thing, that is: the nation that gave Japan culture and language in the seventh century, the Chinese, defeated the sacred nation. Suddenly, the foundation of the glorious but unfinished mansion was shaken, and then the mansion collapsed. Merely the scaffolding was left. The whole thing began to become absurd, like a perfect wedding without the bride. Bearing the above background in mind, we can now understand the basic theme of the movie *The Ceremony*. By Masuo, a typical "post-war period" child, the theme was shouted desperately: "I am not a man of Manchuria, I am an abandoned man."

The dream being shattered, the Japanese people have to live with the reality. Some people (like one of Masuo's uncles) became communist

who condemned the crime that Japan had committed; some (like Masuo's cousin) became radical nationalists who tried to bring back the glory of the old days; some (like the grandfather), pretending that nothing had changed, insisted that "the ceremony has to be carried out". For those who were forced to play a role in a ceremony which had no content, no life, just formality, the only way out of the absurd nightmare was death.

Neither the plot nor the relation of the characters in the movie is complex. But perhaps for a person who is unfamiliar with the structure of an oriental family, the movie may be confusing. Nevertheless, because of the same human nature shared by all men, this excellent film, which successfully expresses the so-called "post-war period" feeling, can move everybody.

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