

At the movies

'Radio Days' touches effectively

By Jackie Barry
Of the Emerald

It is a rambling trip down memory lane, a richly woven study of contrasts, and Woody Allen's recent release, "Radio Days." All three will touch your heart and funny bone.

"Radio Days" presents a poignant, hilarious, semi-historical view of how radio affected the lives of a Rockaway family and their favorite performers in the early 1940s.

The story centers around Joe, a boy devoted to his radio hero, The Masked Avenger. Allen, who wrote and directed the film, narrates the film as the grown-up Joe reminiscing about the "Radio Days of the past."

It is another example of Allen's ability to capture the nuances of human behavior in dialogue and direct his players in the portrayal of solid, believable individuals.

Each segment of the film includes a radio broadcast in some way. Allen first introduces us to the old neighborhood with a story about the burglarization of his neighbor's home, the Needleman. While the burglary is in progress, the telephone rings, one of the burglars answers it, and wins the grand prize on a radio version of "Guess That Tune." The next day, the whole neighborhood watches as a moving truck delivers a load of furnishings to the bewildered Needleman.

Allen continues, describing the favorite shows of each of his family members. The family — Mother (Julie Kavner), Father (Michael Tucker), Joe (Seth Green), Uncle Abe (Josh Mostel) and Aunt Ceil (Renee Lippin), Aunt Bea (Dianne Wiest), and cousin Ruthie (Joy Newmann) — all share a house in the Brooklyn neighborhood.

Joe's own favorite, "The Masked Avenger," moves him to dip into the dark bowels of criminal life in order to purchase a 15 cent Masked Avenger ring. "There are some things in life that are just too compelling," the elder Joe tells us.

We see young Joe and a companion collecting money for the homeland at the bequest of their Rabbi. "Hey!" Joe shouts to each passerby, waving his collection can in front of people. After the collections, the boys retreat to the safety of the beach below the boardwalk to pilfer enough money from the cans to



Courtesy photo

Woody Allen's new movies, "Radio Days," is a touching comedy about 1940s radio, its stars and its fans.

purchase rings.

Later, when Joe's parents tell the rabbi they aren't able to control Joe's listening habits, the rabbi says, "Radio, tsk, tsk, tsk... tends to induce bad dreams."

A fan of romantic music and dance tunes, Aunt Bea searches for "the perfect man." While Bea draws nylon seams on her legs with a pencil and ruler, Mother tells her she's too picky, marrying for love is a "very recent idea," and asks what was wrong with so-and-so?

"Nat Bernstein?" Bea replies: "He wore white socks with a tuxedo!"

Ruthie likes to dress up like Carmen Miranda and lip-sync as she dances before the mirror. With a towel wrapped around her head, adorned with plastic fruit and jewelry, Ruthie twirls in front of the mirror. Uncle Abe and Father happen upon the performance and join her, lightheartedly swaying to the music and lip-syncing the chorus.

Sandwiched between the family tales, Allen presents us with bits of studio broadcasts involving characters like Roger and Irene, who talk on the air over breakfast each morning, and field broadcasts from clubs like the King Cole Room.

Allen chronicles the life of the empty-headed, aspiring radio star Sally White, played by Mia Farrow. "Earlier, I promised some inside stories about the stars," he says.

Sally gets her first big break after witnessing a hit murder at the club in which she works.

The hired killer tries to shoot her but his gun has no more

bullets. So he packs her into his car and drives home to reload. En route, the pair discover they live on adjacent streets in Canarsie. The killer bemoans his fate. "I finally meet somebody from the old neighborhood and I have to kill 'em," he says.

But he doesn't kill her. At home, his mother feeds pasta and peppers to Sally and bullets to her son for his gun. The mother takes her son aside and tells him, "Rocco, you don't have to fear that girl," she's too stupid.

Throughout the film, Allen presents the contrasts between the lives of the radio personalities and their listeners and also presents contrasting events back-to-back.

One particularly touching scene involves all of America listening to a blow-by-blow description of the rescue of eight-year-old Polly Phelps from the bottom of a well. We hear the dead child's parents weeping behind the newscaster's voice. We see families huddled around their radios, holding their loved ones close as they experience the tragedy with the family.

And then, BAM! We're at the King Cole Room for a live broadcast on New Year's Eve 1943.

The movie includes an extensive soundtrack of music from the 1940s. Allen uses the soundtrack as effectively as he does the story line and the dialogue to explain how radio touched individuals like Joe and his family as well as the world as a whole.

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