



Judy Davis and Woody Allen in *To Rome with Love*

That's Amore

Woody Allen's love letter to Rome

TO ROME WITH LOVE: Written and directed by Woody Allen. Edited by Alisa Lepselter. Cinematography, Darius Khondji. Starring Woody Allen, Ellen Page, Alec Baldwin, Jesse Eisenberg, Roberto Benigni, Penélope Cruz, Judy Davis, Greta Gerwig. Sony Pictures Classics, 2012. R. In English and Italian. 112 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Woody Allen is a great American filmmaker, though I'm not sure if I should place that somewhat queasy statement in quotation marks or simply note that, as an assertion, it drags the luggage of several qualifiers. Among those qualifiers I would list: *limited*, in that Allen has, for most of his career, set his movies in the hermetic dreamland of a New York City suspiciously devoid of ethnic diversity; *imitative*, in that his reputation largely depends on Americanizing the visions of such legendary directors as Bergman and Fellini; and, most difficult to explain, *slight*, meaning his films, no matter how masterfully rendered, seem to skim along an existential plane that is all surfaces, quirks, neuroses and erotic complication, without ever feeling truly cathartic or revelatory.

Alas, I am now in the uncomfortable position of having called Woody Allen a great, albeit limited, imitative and slight, American filmmaker. Uncomfortable, because there are several Woody Allen movies I like quite a bit, and a few I actually like quite a lot, though none I truly love. *Annie Hall*, of course, is irresistibly charming, but *Manhattan* is better; *Zelig* is fantastic; his *New York Stories* segment truly sucked, and *Crimes & Misdemeanors* sucked just a little less; *Bullets Over Broadway* is underrated; *Hannah & Her Sisters* is a minor classic; *Husbands and Wives* was pretty damn stunning, but *Deconstructing Harry*, though severely flawed, might just be my favorite; and his late-career flicks, like the compelling *Match Point*, have been surprisingly solid.

What the best of these films share in common is a flitting, wry intelligence and secular inwardness that amounts, ironically, to a kind of patchwork, serialized portrait of the artist as a mirror. This director's body of work, stretching six decades now, is not so much autobiographical as auto-erotic — the masturbatory oeuvre as aesthetic wish fulfillment. Woody Allen is to movies what Philip Roth is to fiction. As much as anything, a Woody Allen movie is about Woody Allen's love affair with movies.

To Rome with Love is Woody Allen's 44th feature film, but who's counting? From the opening credits — stark white lettering on a slate of black, announcing a huge ensemble cast — we are unmistakably in the hands of Woody Allen, who also appears on screen for the first time since 2006's *Scoop*. Seated beside his wife (Judy Davis) on an airplane bound for Italy, kvetching about his fear of turbulence, Woody is a strange sight indeed — at 76, he appears not so much to have aged as to have receded, like a photo bleached out by time. There is something slightly Mr. Magoo-ish about him now, his wit and chops not so much diminished as internalized in self-caricature.

The massive cast — which also includes Alec Baldwin (always good), Roberto Benigni (typically annoying), Jesse Eisenberg (charming as usual), Greta Gerwig (cute, and released from mumblecore at last), Penélope Cruz (at her comic best, and gorgeous), and Ellen Page (simply brilliant) — is put in service of a handful of stories, connected not to each other but through the film's only unlisted cast member, Rome itself, which is lovingly rendered by cinematographer Darius Khondji, who also shot Allen's *Midnight in Paris* as well as David Fincher's exquisitely-wrought breakout film, *Seven*.

As a Woody Allen film, *To Rome with Love* is slighter than usual, but pleasant enough. The love triangle that forms among Eisenberg, Gerwig and Page is far and away the movie's strongest strand, thanks in large part to the sophisticated sexuality and subtle vacuity of Page's turn as an aspiring actor. Fabio Armiliato — who plays the father of Allen and Davis' daughter (Alison Pill)'s boyfriend (Flavio Parenti) — is a revelation as an everyman possessed of a Pavarotti-caliber opera voice — but only in the shower. Of course, you can guess where this leads ...

In fact, from the first scene to the final curtain, you will find very little you can't predict about *To Rome with Love*, though thanks to some strong writing on the part of Allen and a handful of energetic performances, it all seems disarmingly fresh. That might be the best barometer of whether you'll like this movie. For my part, I found myself still willing to follow Woody Allen to Italy, where he scratches "Wish You Were Here" on the back of a cinematic postcard.

EW

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