

## The Funny Man

We thought we knew Woody Allen – the neurotic hypochondriac Jewish New York intellectual. Then came his custody battle with Mia Farrow, and he seemed rather different. The worst is over. But can he ever play Woody again?

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Woody Allen once said that if he could live his whole life again, he'd do it just the same, except he wouldn't read *Beowulf*. Nowadays, in a London hotel suite, post personal scandal, he takes the question with a little more gravitas. 'My whole life again? Gee. I probably would not have been a filmmaker. I probably would have gone to college. I would not have dropped out of school. I would have educated myself, and have taken that more seriously. I would have probably tried to do something in music or dance. Believe it or not, and it sounds so silly to hear myself say it... me on the stage. I would like to have gone into a more physical profession. I think I could have been a ballet dancer. Seriously, I was very athletic.'

Seriously. He works out every day on modern equipment. This scrawny man, 58, tweed and corduroy and anorak, funny inadequate, thinks that maybe had he trained a little harder, or eaten better, or just had the right breaks, he could have been twirling and pirouetting, lifting lithe young women in the air, and not just in the privacy of his own apartment. He thinks he may have been happier. 'Sometimes when I work a year on something, shooting out there in the cold and the rain with the stress and the money, when you've finished, and it is not such a good film, you think "was it really worth it?"' It probably wasn't.'

Woody Allen doesn't have many friends, he says. Not now, not ever, not even in the ballet world. He works out alone in the privacy of his Manhattan apartment. He writes alone 'until I can't take the solitude any longer,' and he plays his clarinet alone each day for an hour or more. But Woody's not a recluse; it's not like people think. He used to be reclusive, and his shyness and closeted pursuit of his art meant we never knew that much about how he lived. But then Mia found those nude photos of one of her adopted daughters, and accused him of molesting another daughter in the attic, and then he sued for custody for three children, and then the court and the psychoanalysts and social workers and court reporters jumped aboard, and now we know a little more about Woody Allen, and we find him rather less Woodyish than we did before.

Before last summer's eye-popping lawsuit, we only knew Woody from his films – this neurotic Jewish New York Intellectual, a *nebbish* auteur, a self-proclaimed sexual animal, a hypochondriac, a sports fan, the complete urban cultural sophisticate, a brilliantly funny man, a shrunken philosopher on life

and death and getting home by six o'clock, an upholder of the highest morals, a man who'd feel guilty about taking matches from a restaurant table. But now we think we know him from the custody battle with Mia Farrow, and what the judge said in his summation. Woody, who previously never inflicted any harm on anyone, except maybe when he made *Interiors* and *September*, now got a fantastic roasting. Mia, his partner for 12 years, his leading lady for 13 movies, a woman 11 young people called mother, described a man whom we partly recognised (a man who would not visit her at her country house because he was frightened of deer), and a monster we did not: someone who was so obsessive about his eight-year-old adopted daughter that she would scream 'hide me, hide me' when he came round; someone who inspired 13-year-old Tam Farrow to invent a new family game called Woody No-Goody. And this was mild compared to the breathless assault from Justice Elliott Wilk, who concluded, with some relish, that not only was Woody not a fit parent, but he was barely a fit human being. Yes, Woody would occasionally cross Central Park to give them breakfast and bring presents, but 'these contributions do not excuse his evident lack of familiarity with the most basic details of their day-to-day existence. He did not bathe his children. He did not dress them, except from time to time, and then only to help them put on their socks and jackets. He knows little of Moses' history (adopted son, 15), except that he has cerebral palsy; he does not know if he has a doctor. He does not know the name of Dylan's and Satchel's paediatrician. He does not know the names of Moses' teachers or about his academic performance. He does not know the name of his children's dentist. He does not know the names of his children's friends. He does not know the names of any of their many pets...'

Having lost his kids, he salvaged some of his reputation in October when investigators ruled there was insufficient evidence to proceed with the allegations of child abuse. And so it's over, the case that stopped traffic, that send us into cinemas to watch *Husbands and Wives* (in which lecturer Allen has an extra-curricular relationship with one of his students), and sent reporters into video shops scouring old films for those life-imitating-art quotes, of which there were hundreds. A man from *Newsweek* even wrote of an album, recorded in 1970 by Dory Previn, who was married to Andre Previn before he left her for Mia Farrow. A song on this record implored 'With my Daddy in the attic, that is where my being wants to bed... and he'll play his clarinet when I despair'.

And what is left now, as Allen sits at a desk in a room at London's Regent Hotel, ready for a handful of interviews? There's Soon-Yi Previn, 22, still the object of his close affections, despite disbelief from his peers. Soon-Yi is with him on this trip. ('I am in no way with a retarded person', he has said. 'I've done the usual things with Soon-Yi that I would do with any person – screen my Bergman films, go to the ball games... I couldn't be more delighted with her.') His sister has also come along for the ride. Woody has stopped off in London after a brief trip to Dublin, where he saw his biological son Satchel, 5, and took him to the zoo; Satchel was with Mia, who was making a film called *Widow's Peak*. His dad gets to see him about three times a week. Apparently Satchel got special privileges at the zoo and was allowed to feed the baby tortoises.

And then, of course, there are the films. Woody has said he would gladly give up his work if caring for his children demanded it, but for now it's business as

usual. He looks like he does on screen, spruce in a dark blue linen jacket, white shirt, cream chinos, brown lace ups, every inch the casual intellectual, but with an eye infection and a little drowsy from the medication. He had walked into the room looking rather lost, head down, as if looking for mislaid keys; he is polite but coolly unengaging. Our interview has an unwritten rule – go easy on the personal, don't dwell on the hamster's names. So for a while we *pas de deux* around the issues, talking of his new film, about his many professional disappointments. I figure: Mr Allen has always liked to dance.

Allen made *Manhattan Murder Mystery* in the thick of the scandal, and it's easy to see why. It is a light film, old-fashioned, straight on plot and quite devoid of higher philosophy. There are some good gags in it. There are no nubile women in it.

It's a bit like the Woody we knew from before, and this is partly because it is an old script, about a couple of ordinary New Yorkers who become sleuths when a neighbour disappears. The first draft was written in the mid-Seventies, but then turned into a relationship movie, into a film called *Annie Hall*. The script then returned to the desk drawer, and Allen subsequently dismissed it as having insufficient weight. 'I don't want to incur the enmity of mystery writers, because nobody is a bigger fan than me, but I always felt that murder mysteries of this type can be delightfully entertaining, but that's all. Full of fun and laughs and thrills – but I never felt that was substantial enough. I didn't want to spend almost a year on something that could never be anything more than fun. Friends would always say to me, "you're crazy, that's a pretentious attitude. Look at *Double Indemnity* and *The Maltese Falcon* – these are wonderful things". I would always say, 'yes, they're wonderful, but they're not enough'. I felt that I would always try and be deeper, even if I failed. But finally the thing kept on coming back and coming back, so I thought, "oh go on, have fun once". It is fun seeing Allen back together with Diane Keaton, still moderately la-di-da, as if Mia Farrow has been wiped from the disc.

Farrow was going to do it originally, Allen says, 'but then we had our falling out. I called Diane and said, 'come and do it', and she said 'sure'. I didn't change the writing. In the original version, Mia would have been the more serious one. Mia is a very, very fine actress and does characters very well. Diane doesn't do characters. She does that one thing – her own personality. This is a very strong personality, stronger than Mia's personality. In *Broadway Danny Rose*, Diane could never have played that role, whereas Mia – (he snaps his fingers) – Mia went in and played it beautifully. Diane is a very funny person naturally. Mia is witty, but not as funny as Diane. Diane is so strong comedically that she doesn't need jokes. In fact, she can't even tell jokes. Mia is great at telling jokes, and if I wrote a joke for her she delivered it very beautifully. Diane can't even deliver a joke – she ruins them.'

Keaton told the *New York Times* that Allen 'responds to me the way he always responded to me, which is like I'm a complete idiot. It's like an old marriage, or like I'm a kid sister.'

'She's so much older now,' Allen says. 'But she's (still) closer to Annie Hall than Lady Macbeth. I'm the same way. I play the same character all the time. If you see a movie of mine that I'm in, no matter how different from the last one, I'm basically playing the same kind of person.'

Allen has made 24 films, and he appears in most of them, usually with the best lines. He's right about his range: even in films he didn't write or direct, like *The Front* (a great McCarthy witchhunt movie from 1976), he fits one of the two standard Allen bills, the know-all or the know-nothing, the European aesthete or the Brooklyn *schlemiel*. As a writer he's tried to be Groucho Marx and Proust, as a director Fellini and Bergman, but as an actor he's his own Mister Nervosa, all the tics and mannerisms and rabbi jokes you can handle, all the grandstand philosophy workout, all delivered the same way, whether in *Bananas* or *Manhattan* or *Husbands and Wives*. Appealing characters, too, characters you wouldn't mind being for a while. But this isn't really Woody, Woody says.

'I don't think it's too close. What you see on the screen is me acting silly and making jokes. But I'm a person who sits at home quietly and broods and writes and works. I'm very serious. I go to movies and sporting events and read. But on the screen you're on for an hour and a half, and if you're a comedian, which I am, you have to be silly and funny. If it's one of my more serious comedies, I have to be believable but amusing. Basically it's so exaggerated, so exaggerated. It's like when I used to go on the talk shows – Johnny Carson or something. You'd lead a normal life, and you're fine and you're serious and you go about your business, and then suddenly you go over to the television studio and rev it up and go into a much different theatrical personality, and then you come off and you're fine, it's artifice. Maybe because unlike Orson Welles or Dustin Hoffman I don't put on a beard or a hunchback and do strange voices, some people make the mistake... But in real life I do not bounce around spouting one-liners. Those are not my interests. So you're no sexual athlete, no bedroom animal?

'That's a standard ploy. The comedian always exaggerates his position as lover or brave fighter or intellect. It's always funny to posture. I am posturing, I promise you.'

Our interview took place two days before *Manhattan Murder Mystery* opened in Manhattan; Allen likes to be out of town for his openings for the same reason he likes to be absent from Oscar night and other gong shows. It's not fear, he insists. It's confidence: he knows whether one of his films has worked or not – what can some critic or panel teach him?

'It's not that I brace myself for a blow or anything. It's just that it's better not to read about your work from other people. I don't want to hear about (the reviews) even when they're good. Someone will say, "oh he should never do this kind of film because of this reason", or "he does this film so brilliantly...", and when you're writing it's very hard to push that out of your mind. You think "gee, am I making that mistake again?" Or "if I just do this I will get that thing again, that thing that people seem to like so much".'

Allen says he doesn't really know what people want, doesn't even know who his audience is. In *Stardust Memories* an alien tells him, 'You want to do mankind a service? Tell funnier jokes'. Elsewhere in the film, Allen's character Sandy says: 'I don't want to make funny movies any more. They can't force me to... and I don't feel funny. I look around the world and all I see is human suffering'. Playing Broadway Danny Rose, Allen speaks not only to Mia Farrow's character Tina, but to his audience as well: 'You know what my philosophy of life is? That it's important to have some laughs, no question about it, but you've got to suffer a little too'.

*Hannah and Her Sisters* made money in 1987, but subsequent films have either fared poorly, or broken even. His serious shots at higher art – *September, Shadows and Fog, Another Woman, Interiors* – have barely paid for the processing. But for Allen, like most filmmakers who choose to sidestep the Los Angeles system, mere numbers have never been much of an indicator of success. For him, his films are mostly failures for other reasons.

‘It would be easier for me to find the few that I didn’t have a disappointing feeling about. I was not disappointed in *Husbands and Wives*, nor was I in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* or *Zelig*. For a while I had a very good feeling about *Stardust Memories*. This is based on the fact that I set out to do something. I had an idea that I thought was terrific, and I did it. I really didn’t ruin my idea this time! But almost all the time, by the time the film is finished, I think, “oh it was such a wonderful idea but I’ve ruined it, I’ve made too many mistakes, I wish I had the money to make it all over again”’

If Allen was to guess what filmgoers wanted from him, he’d pick light romantic comedies about contemporary people. ‘But that’s a fatal trap, because if you want to work that way you make one of those films and you find they don’t like it at all. In fact they like your serious period films... But if the films don’t work it’s entirely my fault. No one stands over me, making me do less than I’m able to artistically. I’m always working to the full extent of my ability all the time. But I’m not naïve. If I make a film like *Shadows and Fog*, and it’s black and white and period and existential and has to do with an anonymous and middle-European city 75 years ago, I know basically that that’s basically not a bread and butter theme for most drive-ins, but it would never occur to me not to make it.’

Do you feel there is a finite amount of good material inside you? ‘I do not. I feel just the opposite. I have the other feeling: God forbid something should happen to me before I get out my next 200 ideas.’

Allen’s new film, which began shooting in Manhattan last November, is another comedy. He’s not in it, as the lead must be in his twenties. Set in New York City in the 1920s, it concerns bootleggers and racketeers, and like most of his projects at this stage, it doesn’t have a title. ‘People always think that I hide titles until the last minute,’ he says, ‘but it’s never so. If I had a title I’d love to give it to you now and get it into the public consciousness. Usually I look at a film when it’s finished and give it an aggressive title depending on how good I think it is. I don’t want to get too bold if I look at the film and think, “gee, this is an embarrassment, I want to hide it”.’

It will be the first of his movies to be produced by Sweetland Films, the company owned by his best friend Jean Doumanian that had a hit in 1992 with Svan Nyquist’s *The Ox*. Allen’s sister, Letty Aronson, also works at Sweetland. Woody says he jumped at the chance to work with his new team (and end a good relationship with TriStar), and denies rumours that this movie has anything to do with his personal troubles. ‘My life has not changed much at all. I pretty much do the same dull things as I always did. I get up in the morning and write, practice my clarinet, and go into Michael’s pub on Monday night and play jazz. I write another film, it’s pretty much the same.’

And how has the world’s relationship with him changed? ‘I can’t tell. The same. I walk down the street and people say hello, and I try to avoid it. People ask for autographs and I give them. People seem the same. But then I wouldn’t know, because I never or rarely have any real contact with the public.’

People never ever come up and say “I saw your movie and I didn’t like it.” They just walk past. That’s all a performer really knows – generally nice things.’

There is one reference in our conversation to his ‘terrible’ year – ‘and even that’s not so bad on a global scale,’ but mostly it’s sweetness and light. For example he found it ‘hilarious’ to see how big the story was everywhere. ‘I can’t tell you why it was so big. I wouldn’t have thought that we’d be a couple to cause that kind of commotion. Maybe it was a slow time for the press.’ And he talks of Mia in clinical terms. ‘There isn’t direct communication at this point, but I’m sure that will change. I’m sure we’ll talk again.’

But surely, I say, your relationship with your children has changed? ‘Oh right, now I’ve got to, mmhmm, right, that’s, now I’ve got to, sure, I get to, I get to see my son not enough to suit me, but I’m working on that, and my daughter I haven’t seen at all, and I’m working on it. That will change in time, both of these will change and ease up as time goes on. My lawyers and I are trying to facilitate that.’

During this answer, Allen’s American PR, who has been in the room for part of the interview, departs tutting. A minute later she’s back and says: ‘You know, there’s so much personal talk here, and I just checked, and this is really supposed to be about *Manhattan Murder Mystery*.’

Just how much the personal upheaval has truly affected him became clear in a press conference he gave a few weeks after our meeting. In a prepared statement, he first addressed Mia Farrow. ‘I publicly apologise for hurting you,’ he said. ‘I beg for peace. If the Arabs and Israelis can do it, we can. I know you can be forgiving and quite terrific at times. You are a first-rate actress and a beautiful woman. For the sake of the little children, let’s end all hostilities instantly and settle our situation. Not next month, or next week, but today. Please, let’s put this behind us... I promise to be accommodating, and I have no conditions, except that you stop sending me bills from Alan Dershowitz’ (Farrow’s star lawyer, once a huge Woody Allen fan who couldn’t stop quoting him in his books).

Allen then summoned up a tremulous word swell to describe the allegations of child abuse. He said that Dylan had been brutalised and was subjected to ‘endless indignities in a wheezing, salivating, desperate, but unsuccessful attempt to fabricate a case.’ To Dylan he said he was sorry for missing her eighth birthday, ‘but they just would not let me do it. I love you and miss you. But don’t worry, the dark forces will not prevail.’

If I could live my whole life again, I’d probably do it just the same, except I wouldn’t order the chicken breast salad at Michael’s Pub while watching Woody Allen play jazz. The food is straight out of the Allen joke book, terrible and such small portions. But the food and the \$35 minimum charge are not the thing, because we’ve come for the art, the music, Dixie transposed to the ground floor of a midtown Manhattan office block. The *New Yorker* calls it a ‘jazz lair for the tasselled-loafers set’, but in mid-November it was mostly German tourists. There’s more Oompah than Hot Jazz about the place, a cramped faux-Anglo-Scottish confusion that has a portrait of Henry VIII opposite a mirror that reads ‘McLennan & Urquart, Dalkeith, Edinburgh, Mild Ale’. The toilets are designated Gents and Birds. But the room is full! You’ve slipped the maître d’ a big note for a table near the band, and here he comes,

that man in the green anorak and floppy khaki hat, the dysfunctional Benny Goodman, Mr Pack Up His Troubles and Let's Get Happy, a one-a, a two-a...

Allen has played clarinet with the New Orleans Funeral and Ragtime Orchestra every Monday for over 20 years. He was here when Hollywood gave him four Oscars for *Annie Hall*, here a couple of days after the Farrow scandal, sucking and blowing his way through some merry standards, trying to make out this is a casual drop-in jam rather than a high-profile turn by a film star. Put another way, no one would be here to see a bald man play trumpet and a permed woman pump a tuba and a fat man play guitar if a spectacled man wasn't taking the lead on 'When The Saints...' Allen's not a bad player, although he lacks what you might call improvisational flair. It's probable that even his jazz had taken on a different air post-scandal: a what-me-worry feel, a sort of fiddling while Rome burns.

After a 45 minute set, Allen gathers his jacket from a friends' table, says hello to a few people, signs an autograph and heads for the door with a woman carrying a script under her arm. They depart in a large limo, and a man in Michael's Pub tells his clientele that the main attraction will not be re-appearing for the second session.

'I was told, 'Oh you're really going to like Woody, he's real easy to work with, there's no ego in it.' And it was true.'

Linda Sunshine, a New York writer and publisher, has spent almost two years working with Allen and his people on *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader*, to be published later this month by Cape. It's a lavish greatest hits collection, short passages from his scripts, essays and Sixties nightclub monologues set alongside some rare photos (and some incongruous ones, like the picture of an electric cord to illustrate a segment on Allen's mechanical incompetence).

Allen has full veto – 'You can't move without his approval' – but Sunshine says he was 'wonderfully generous' and only asked her to remove five things he didn't like, including a few excerpts from an early *Playboy* interview, a few jokes from his monologues and a picture from *Casino Royale*, 'which he looks kind of dorky in'.

Sunshine believes the scandal has had a 'devastating' effect, not least on the sales of her book in the United States. She recalls 'how hard it was to get into the bookstores after all this stuff. The whole dynamic changed. It hurt a lot – bookstores that were originally very interested suddenly became afraid to take it.'

The book was launched in early November with a party at the Gotham Book Mart, a much-loved store that Allen has called 'everyone's fantasy of what the ideal bookshop is'. In the upstairs gallery the owner, Andreas Brown, has organised a Woody Allen retrospective, an intelligent display of original scripts, rare photos and other ephemera, and as Brown takes you through it you realise what a great career it's been, and how sad if we can't enjoy it still, the hilarious, prodigious output of essays and records and films now stalked by high moral revisionism. (On my visit an elderly headscarfed woman skimmed the show, pausing at a case containing some handwritten pages. 'I'm a graphologist,' she told Brown. 'Are there any more examples I can study?' A little later she said, 'It looks to me that he has the handwriting of someone who, when you offer your hand to shake it, he'll punch you in the stomach.' The curator smiled.)

'You have to separate it out,' Brown says later. 'In his films he has spent so much time intellectualising about the big issues – life, God, death and relationships – and there's some very deep thinking there. Does that mean it's redundant and worthless just because of what happened and what he did? People said that about Tennessee Williams at the time: how can you expect us to believe all your great, noble, grand pronouncements when you're so corrupt and live such a low life?'

Tennessee Williams presented an answer of sorts in his 1953 play *Camino Real*. 'We have to distrust each other,' he wrote. 'It is our only defence against betrayal.'

So night has fallen on Woody's Central Park apartment, from where he can still see Mia's place. His parents, 93 and 87, live a couple of blocks away, and he sees them every week. 'We've always been on good terms, though they were never that interested in most of the things I was.' He once said his parents' values were God and carpeting. They have lived within two blocks of him for his whole adult life, 'and with me when I was a kid'. A child who lived with his parents! Those wacky old-fashioned ways.

Unlike his parents and grandparents, Woody is not a religious man – he says Judaism has never made sense to him, all those dogmas and rules, nothing but 'silly nonsense that had to do with costumes and prescriptions'. He says he has no spiritual guidance, only his sense of morality, his belief in decency, both of which has just raised every eyebrow in town.

He has yet to write or film his masterpiece. 'I'm still waiting. I'd love to finish a movie and think, 'my God, this could be placed alongside *Grand Illusion* or *The Bicycle Thief* or *Citizen Kane*. You have to keep thinking you could do it one day, but my films are always a disappointment. I can conceive of going on indefinitely.'

Novels are now a possibility. He's got an idea, and soon, in his own cataclysmic phrasing, he 'may not be able to suppress the urge anymore'.

With novels you don't have to go out in the world at all, '... and if it's terrible, you don't have to show it to anybody'.

One last question as his people hustle him out, one that he answered almost 20 years ago in *Love and Death*. 'The question is, have I learned anything about life? Only that human beings are divided into mind and body. The mind embraces all the nobler aspirations, like poetry and philosophy, but the body has all the fun. The important thing, I think, is not to be bitter.'

And at the Regent Hotel in 1993? 'I've learned that you can come through all this attention pretty much unscathed. That there are far worse things in life than the attentions of the press. It's just been a pain, that's all.'