

## Annie Hall

By Jay Carr

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When they walk into a bookstore, she wants books about cats, he wants books about death. She, of course, is Diane Keaton as Annie Hall. He, of course, is Woody Allen, playing himself, sort of, yet dancing around some deft artistic contrivances in one of the great never-the-twain-shall-meet comedies. Sweet, funny, rueful, bitter-sweet, Annie Hall draws upon the on-again, off-again relationship of Keaton and Allen in so-called real life. But it's as much about the limits of art as it is about the limits of their love affair. Allen's Alvy Singer and Keaton's Annie Hall end up apart. So, in the film, do life and art – the first with its inevitable disappointments, the second with its consolations – a dichotomy that Allen has explored repeatedly in art, because they usually don't in life.

*Annie Hall* is full of artful artlessness. Allen begins and ends the film by framing it with a pair of old Borscht Belt jokes. They're more than the security blanket of an artist who began performing as a stand-up comedian. In *Annie Hall*, Allen steps off confidently as a filmmaker, in charge of his material, knowing what he wants to do with it. As in his earlier film, *Play It Again, Sam*, he talks directly to the audience. After the parodies of *Sleeper* and *Love and Death*, his subject again is himself, but he's ready to explore it more deeply and deftly – and does, with more self-confrontation and less shtick.

The opening joke, the one about the woman complaining that the Catskills hotel's food is so terrible and the portions are so small, aptly mirrors his view of life. The last, about the man who says he can't afford to talk his deluded brother out of the belief that he's a chicken because the family needs the eggs, speaks to Allen's belief that we need our illusions – a belief that love can happen, a belief that art can happen, or both. The poignant joke in *Annie Hall* is that for Alvy, Allen's alter ego, love could have happened, but he's too insecure to allow it to. And Keaton's Annie is too neurotic to stand up under his vacillations.

Keaton launched a fashion mode in her men's hat, vest, tie, and slacks. But Annie plays against the assertive mannishness Hollywood had previously associated with women dressed as men. Unable to complete a sentence, speaking in self-deprecating fragments, smiling her way out of the verbal corners she paints herself into with what was to become her trademark "La-di-da," Keaton is the anti-Dietrich. Meanwhile, in his stammer-



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ing but somehow always forward-pressing way, Allen became the new paradigm of the sexy leading man, a nerd who routed Hollywood's traditional he-men. Suddenly wit and sensitivity were what was sexy in a man. In the wake of such actors as Al Pacino and Dustin Hoffman supplanting the Rock Hudson and Cary Grants, Allen not only was plugged into the zeitgeist, he became one of its shapers.

What comes through in repeated viewings is that Alvy *noodged* the relationship to death – and is unsparring enough of himself to say so. He's always at Annie, pecking away, questioning, urging her to improve herself. Apart from her insecurities, she puts up with him because he's bright. Once they get past their funny scene in which subtitles tell us how they're actually sizing one another up sexually as they exchange gassy pseudo-esthetic badinage about photography, he lever lets up. It's almost inevitable that her first choice in the book store is going to be a book about cats. It's a subject she knows he can't control, a choice of subject she knows as some level will render him speechless. As in all great

screwball comedies – and *Annie Hall* is one of them – an unpredictable woman upends a stuffy man.

That someone who looks and sounds like Allen would even have a serious chance at a relationship with someone like Keaton's Annie would have been unthinkable in a comedy of previous generations, despite the occasional romantic successes of a Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin. The scene in which Annie takes Alvy home to her family in Wisconsin, and he's convinced he's being stigmatized for his Jewishness, is a classic. But it's also at the root of the therapeutic influence Alvy represents. Unlike Alvy's Jewish family, featuring table talk at which everything and everybody were aired and bared, Annie's WASP family is repressed. One result is her brother Duane's barely contained rage, expressed in his violent fantasies, which give rise to the hilarious driving-to-the-airport-in-the-rain sequence, the hilarity arising from Alvy's deer-in-the-headlights expression behind the sweep of the windshield wipers as Duane looks murderously clenched and Annie looks oblivious.

Again and again, you want to yell at the screen and tell Alvy to just let up a little and leave Annie alone and things will go much better. But the stony avoidance of anything but banalities at the Hall dinner table is the reason Annie is such a neurotic mess, or rather, the reason she's the kind of neurotic mess she is. She wants to be a singer but is too inhibited to fill her songs with the kind of emotion great singers summon. Her first performance of "Seems Like Old Times" rides a small, tentative voice, so quavery and exposed and naked that you writhe for her. At the end, Allen shows how Annie has grown in confidence by reprising Annie's vocal of

"Seems Like Old Times." The song underpins the melancholy nostalgia of the ending, where Alvy and Annie meet as friends, not lovers. The second time Annie sings it, her voice has more confidence and poise. It's a barometer of her growth, if also a self-compliment to Alvy, the implication being that the relationship with him has helped free her.

Allen's final version of the script eliminated several surreal fantasy scenes in favor of the down-in-the-trenches flavor of what transpired between Alvy and Annie. He keeps the focus on Alvy's rueful surfeit of awareness and self-awareness. Audiences were charmed by *Annie Hall*, partly because of Allen's affection for New York (an affection that was to reach its apotheosis in *Manhattan*). Nobody mistook it for a sentimental romantic comedy, though. It's too complex, too bleak. Even when it's being funny, as when Allen needles his own ego by stopping people in the street and talking to them about his love life, as if they know all about it, and care. *Annie Hall* remains true to its pessimism.

Extolling love even as he elbows it away, proclaiming the healing power of art even as he scorns its devices and artifices in the act of using them, Allen has it both ways. In conversationally engaging us in seemingly spontaneous asides about what we're to see, as if it's up for grabs, Allen and *Annie Hall* go Luigi Pirandello one better. The Italian playwright stood outside his work and commented on it in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. *Annie Hall* is one character in search of an author – and finding him looking into the mirror, then looking into the lens.