

Midnight in Paris

Woody Allen has directed more than 40 movies in the last 45 years and has shifted gears from examining every tic of the neurotic New Yorker (himself) to taking on projects in Europe and gradually excising himself from the screen.

He started his steady work across the pond with “Match Point” (2005). Since then he has made three other films in London and one in Spain—and now he adds Paris to his list. “Midnight in Paris,” a sweet comedy double wrapped in nostalgia, shows Allen besotted with the City of Light.

There is another recent Allen trend: namely, that when he’s not in the cast, he offers one character as a substitute “Woody” with his own familiar persona. Examples of this include the unlikely Kenneth Branagh in “Celebrity” (1998), the anxious Will Ferrell in “Melinda and Melinda” (2004), and, most recently, the almost spastic Larry David in “Whatever Works” (2009).



With “Midnight in Paris,” he has a new stand-in, but with a twist. His protagonist is slurry-voice, surf-blond Owen Wilson (seen at left) and, while Wilson represents the Allen point-of-view, on screen he is the laid-back Owen we have come to know, not some New York schlemiel. Proof is that he makes Wilson, who plays one Gil Pender, a Hollywood writer and script doctor, a laid-back Angeleno thinking about a house in Malibu.

The story has Gil in Paris with his fiancée, Inez (Rachel McAdams) both sponging off her well-off parents while her dad is on business. Gil is smitten with the city, and, given his literary bent (he is working on a novel), he is besotted with its history as an artistic cynosure of the 1920’s. Practical Inez dismisses him as a dreamer and seems much more eager to experience Paris through the pedantic eyes of her ex-professor, Paul (Michael Sheen), who proves an ostentatious guide to the city’s sights.

One night late, after Inez retreats to their hotel, Gil rests on city steps while a clock intones midnight. A vintage cab pulls up and two eager voices plead for him to join them. Intrigued, he rides with them to a club where he learns they are Scott (Tim Hiddleston) and Zelda (Alison Pill), and that guy over there playing “Let’s Do It” is named Cole! Fascinated, he accepts another ride to visit the Fitzgerald’s American pal, Ernest (Corey Stoll), at another café, then later he’s taken to meet a testy Gertrude (Kathy Bates), who is criticizing a painting by an annoyed Pablo...and so it goes.

He is engulfed in his own desired dream world. Better yet, these cultural paragons are nice to him, ask about his work, treat him like a decent guy. The next day Gil looks to re-live his escapade again and begs off being with his girl to wait for another midnight adventure. Over time, he is particularly attracted to one of Picasso’s mistresses, the beautiful Adriana (Marion Cotillard), who herself harbors another

Parisian dream: that of the Belle Époque of the 1890's. The picture proceeds to tell how Gil sorts out his throwback life with his actual one.

The working out of Gil's nostalgia trips is the principal pleasure of this film. Wilson, who often portrays the flake, projects those aspects, but he comes off, too, with a spunky spirit, wide-eyed in meeting his cultural idols yet not overwhelmed by them. He's assured enough to give the young Luis Buñuel tips on a theme for an upcoming film (cinephiles will recognize it as "The Exterminating Angel") and to charm Salvador Dali (Adrien Brody) at a sidewalk café. These time-shift sequences—they are not dream sequences—are the strength and fun of the picture with the charming Gil representing a good-hearted and culturally alert American. The period sound track helps, too, with Cole Porter's songs coursing through some scenes.

There are some well-laid jokes, too. One of the best has the obnoxious Paul get his comeuppance when Gil, standing before an actual Picasso he saw at Gertrude Stein's apartment, corrects Paul fully about its subject and provenance. There is also a great kicker to the picture. Adriana's dream of a glorious past is likewise fulfilled, as a final midnight jaunt leads her and Gil to a night at Maxim's at the height of the Belle Époque where they can pull up to Toulouse-Latrec's table and hear Gauguin himself lament his own crude, industrialized times, dreaming of the Renaissance...

That latter remark highlights a larger point Allen is making: though dreaming of another earlier, "better," time is always subject to failure and disappointment, such nostalgia can still be a salve to the soul.

"Midnight in Paris" is not flawless. Inez's parents (Kurt Fuller and Mimi Kennedy), are too crass stereotypes of the grasping, uncurious American business class (much as the French might caricature them), while Inez herself appears as a jumpy harridan, a poor use of the usually expert and charming McAdams. In fact, one has to wonder how these two intendeds, so plainly on a crash course, ever got together in the first place.

Still, allow Allen to indulge his own affection for Paris. The film, shot on location by Darius Khondji, makes the city glow. In fact, the film begins, over Sidney Bechet's lovely soprano saxophone lines, with a long parade of living postcards of the city in all moods, a stunning visual catalogue that would make anyone rush on-line to book a flight (*The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 100 min*).

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