

Whatever Works

Yes, Woody's back, back picking at a bad spot in the Big Apple, in what I reckon is his 40th feature film. In 2005 Woody Allen abandoned his beloved Manhattan to make *Match Point* in London. Now, after some hits and misses overseas, he is back home testing relationship comedy in that testy city. One big difference: his stand-in this time is another kind of narcissist: Larry David.

Allen, when not a lead in his films, usually offers one character whose manner mirrors his own halting, neurotic persona. Examples of this doubling include an anxious John Cusack in *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994), the unlikely Kenneth Branagh in *Celebrity* (1998), or, most recently, Will Ferrell channeling him in *Melinda and Melinda* (2004). Here, the chemistry is interesting: Woody's alter ego is another bespectacled, jumpy, opinionated New York Jew, but with a twist. He has grafted some trademark Woody mannerisms onto the quite different stalk of the character so clearly delineated in Larry David's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" series.

It's a bit confusing at first. You think you are seeing David just imitate Allen, the fussy New York intellectual gadfly. Then you realize Allen is writing lines for David which the latter could have written for himself. Where Allen is neurotic, David is misanthropic; where Allen is self-deprecating, David is boastful; where Allen is sly, David is caustic. They **sound** the same, but Larry David, as Boris Yellnikoff, is a scold and a curmudgeon (yellnikoff he does!). In his movies, Woody, looking inward, might contemplate suicide because of his own inadequacies, whereas here, Larry, looking outward, wants to die because humans in toto are "a failed species."

The plot of *Whatever Works*, is familiar from other Allen works and serves mainly to give Boris a chance to vent about his life and the fatuous lives of others. Boris, a quantum physicist whose first wife (Carolyn McCormick) is "too right" for him, abandons home and work only to fall into a liaison with the Mississippi waif Melodie (Evan Rachel Wood), whom he houses, teaches, and eventually weds. She grows, then grows beyond Boris when a younger man, Randy (Henry Lavill), appears, and frustrated Boris ends up with a woman he literally lands on in a suicide attempt.

Throughout, Boris—often breaking the fourth wall by addressing the audience—both ridicules the vapidness and cruelty of man while ultimately offering his own rather halting philosophy, i.e., just go ahead and do "whatever works—as long as you don't hurt anybody." By the way, Larry/Boris as a brilliant quantum physicist is about as believable as the ditz Diana Richards is as a nuclear scientist in the 1990 James Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*.

Is any of this funny? Not funny enough, I fear, since the sourness of *Whatever Works* dampens most laugh-out-loud prospects. One humorous element that the Boris character lacks, for example, that David's character shows in "Curb:" the latter's utter cluelessness and inadvertent self-mockery, the source of most of the yucks in that HBO series. The character who garners the best laughs is Melodie's mom, Marietta, played smartly by Patricia Clarkson. A God-

besotted Southerner concerned about her daughter loose in the big city, she succumbs all too readily to its pagan charms and becomes part of a goofy *ménage a trois*.

The film will indulge, if not strictly amuse, Woody Allen fans because of the many familiar devices. A standard one is the ingénue shiksa falling for the much older man (Woody's perpetual wishful thinking). Here young Wood—21 at the time of filming (and a sweet presence she is), falls for David, 61. This kind of creepy connection has been offered by Allen before, perhaps never more awkwardly than in "Everybody Says I love You," where Woody was the object of Julia Roberts' lust! Other familiar touches include the older man educating the benighted young woman, the delight in old movies and classical pop songs, the view that highlights the wispy, off-hand nature of love, and the collective old-lover's get together at the end, with a finale here reminiscent of *Hannah and Her Sisters*, a much better New York story.

These characteristic Allen elements may not make you love *Whatever Works*, but they will bring you back to that Woody territory you once knew and may have missed.

(*"Whatever Works"* is rated "PG-13", 92 mins.)

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