Nine Questions for Woody Allen: An Interview

Derek Parker Royal

Woody Allen is an extremely busy man, producing a film a year and always seeming to work on more than one script at a time. Eric Lax, in both his 1991 biography and his more recent Conversations with Woody Allen: His Films, the Movies, and Moviemaking (2007), reveals how Allen is constantly juggling projects and is continuously shuttling from shooting site, to editing room, to mixing board, to projection room, and in-between all of these activities still finding the time to write out new scripts by hand. Such a schedule does not surprise me, for I have indirectly suffered from its effects. On several occasions during 2008 and 2009, I tried contacting Woody Allen for an interview. Most of these times I was politely informed by his assistant that Mr. Allen was either out of town (or about to leave town) on a shoot, or that he was much too busy finalizing the next project to talk with me. I understood and respected his dilemma, but I nonetheless persisted in requesting an audience with the filmmaker. Finally, in June 2009, my perseverance was rewarded. Woody Allen agreed to respond to several questions I could pose to him via email. Of the ten questions I sent him, he answered five. Then in December of that same year, I asked if the filmmaker would respond to a few additional or follow-up questions. He agreed. I sent him ten more questions—a couple of them rephrasings of earlier questions he neglected to answer the first time around—and this time he responded to four. The result of these efforts is the brief interview that follows. While Woody Allen may have not had the time to answer some of my questions more fully, what he does say is highly revealing.

Much thanks to Woody Allen for finding the time to correspond with me, and to Melissa Tomajanovich who was instrumental in helping to bring this interview about.

Derek Parker Royal: You’ve been writing for film or directing since the mid-1960s. You state in previous interviews that your filmmaking strategies have changed over that time and with each successive film. From your perspective, how would you characterize your films over the past two decades?

Woody Allen: My films of the past two decades are better than my earlier films because they are more grown-up, more ambitious, and in the main, just better movies.

DPR: Looking at your body of work since Alice, which films stand out the most to you, and why? Which do you feel are the most successful?

Woody Allen: Match Point, Cassandra’s Dream, Vicky Cristina Barcelona, Bullets Over Broadway, Husbands and Wives, Manhattan Murder Mystery, Hollywood Ending—These films comprise some of my best work.
DPR: Over the past twenty years, which movies of yours are you the least satisfied with, or the most disappointed in, and why?

WA: *Curse of the Jade Scorpion* and *Scoop* are two of my worst films, both because of me being in them. I’m not being facetious. If the lead roles had been played by different actors, the films would’ve been better, not because I’m incompetent but rather badly cast.

DPR: Many have seen *Deconstructing Harry* as a somewhat autobiographical movie, a chance for you to create a nasty character and respond to the way the media was portraying you in the early 1990s. (I remember the joke toward the end of the film, as you were descending into Hell, that the level containing the media was completely filled.) What went into the creation of Harry Block? And when you were making the film, did you have any real-life authors in mind, such as Philip Roth (whom many have seen in the figure of Harry)?

WA: I never thought I was unlikable. The film was not remotely autobiographical, and I would never set out to address any aspect of my life in my films. I just search for amusing ideas and when the idea hit me of a writer character that you would learn about through seeing his works dramatized, I thought it was amusing. Philip Roth never crossed my mind, nor any of the other nonsense. I’ve never suffered from writer’s block all my life and made up the story. I have no particular point of view ever that isn’t what’s expedient to entertain. And so, if I did a film, for example, about a psychoanalyst and he did a heroic thing, people might come away thinking that I like analysts or psychoanalysis, but I have no pronounced feeling about that or any other subject when it comes to work and would not hesitate for a second to do a story where the psychoanalyst was a scoundrel or a murderer, if that gave me a good plot. The point I’m making is that you really can’t tell anything at all about me from my movies (or very, very little) because I’ll take any position that makes one of my totally prefabricated, made up stories work. Therefore, over the years, me and people who know me shake our heads in astonishment and often get amusement over the observations made about me and the attributes given to me that are based on my films.

DPR: You were an actor in a string of comedies from *Small Time Crooks* to *Anything Else* (and the *Scoop*), but since that time you have remained off the screen. Why have you decided to remove yourself from the cast and only write and direct?

WA: I’d be happy to be in a film if the part is right. Nothing that I’ve written in the last few years had a part that I’d be right for.

DPR: Where do you see yourself going now in your filmmaking, both in terms of the kind of scripts you have in mind and where you’ll primarily shoot?

WA: I’m always struggling to find interesting ideas and I’ll probably do less films with me in them although there will be some. I’m still trying to make a really great film. I would like to work in New York more but I can’t afford it.

DPR: Many of your recent movies have contained some very heavy subject matter. Why has there been such a concentration of so many dramas lately? With the success of *Match Point*, have you been wanting to explore that form more fully?

WA: I’ve always wanted to explore it, always have in the past. *Match Point* was the only commercial success. I really do whatever idea I come up with and there is no agenda or plan. It could be ten dramas in a row, ten comedies in a row, or random alternating.

DPR: Musical history plays a major role in your movies. I’m thinking here of *Radio Days* and *Sweet and Lowdown*, where it became a central theme, and *Everyone Says I Love You*, where many of the old standards were put center stage. And I’ve read that you would love to make a film on jazz, perhaps something more historical or based on your idol, Sidney Bechet. Besides its influence on your soundtracks, how might your love of certain forms of music find its way into your future projects?

WA: Obviously, almost all of my films are scored with my favorite kind of music, which is, in order: Jazz/Popular Song/Classics.
DPR: It’s clear that Ingmar Bergman is a filmmaker that you admire, and you mention his works in several of your early movies. What kinds of films do you watch, now, that you admire and perhaps even find as a source of inspiration (or competition)? And for that matter, are there any works of fiction or particular authors that you find yourself reading and that have an influence on your filmmaking?

WA: I’m still influenced by the foreign filmmakers of the ‘50s and ‘60s and there’s no one around today that influences me but that’s not to say that there are not directors that I enjoy.