Woody Allen strikes a nerve--good for him!

Celebrity, written and directed by Woody Allen--reviewed by David Walsh

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Life in America tends to satirize itself these days. We have Kenneth Starr and Jerry Springer and Pamela Anderson Lee and Tom Brokaw and Howard Stern and Donald Trump and Linda Tripp and Michael Jackson and Henry Hyde and Bill Gates and Dennis Rodman and Johnnie Cochran, Jr. and Cindy Crawford and Newt Gingrich and Michael Isikoff and Rush Limbaugh and Marcia Clark and Tim Russert and Michael Ovitz and Dick Armey and Oprah Winfrey and Pat Robertson and Cokie Roberts and Larry King and Mike Tyson and Kathie Lee Gifford and Joe Klein and Barbara Walters and Geraldo Rivera and so many others to thank for that.

Nonetheless, Woody Allen has done us a service with *Celebrity*, his rude assault on the culture of empty fame. The film follows the diverging fortunes of a formerly married couple, Lee (Kenneth Branagh) and Robin Simon (Judy Davis). He is a journalist, desperate to sell a screenplay and, more generally, to gain entry to the world of celebrity, one that promises money and sex and glamour. His ex-wife is a high school teacher, left shell-shocked by the break-up of her marriage of 16 years. She is prepared to take desperate measures to regain her emotional balance and self-confidence.

Lee plays up to a series of celebrities. We first meet him on a film set where the director is assuring his leading lady (Melanie Griffith) that the previous shot, of her briefly dashing across a sidewalk and looking up to the sky, expressed 'the whole human condition.' Later at an opening a fashionable painter denounces his success, 'Don't buy my paintings just to be *in*!' he exclaims. Lee is there with his latest infatuation, a 'supermodel' (Charlize Theron). She turns out to be more interested in his car.

In the film's strongest scene, a spoiled, vicious movie actor (Leonardo DiCaprio) trashes a hotel room and beats up his girlfriend, while Lee tries to pitch his movie script. The writer then joins the self-obsessed young star first on an excursion to a boxing match in Atlantic City, where Lee also loses $6,000 rolling dice, and then, back at the hotel, in a not very successful venture into group sex. The girl 'assigned' to Lee, when she discovers he's a writer, tells him that she is one too. 'I write like Chekhov,' she explains cheerfully.

Lee goes back to working on a novel and takes up with an attractive editor (Famke Janssen). The night before they are to move in together, he meets an aspiring actress (Winona Ryder) who he has had his eye on. They have a rendezvous at midnight, and in the morning Lee announces to his erstwhile girlfriend that he has 'met somebody else.' In revenge, she takes his novel and drops it, page by page, from a ferry as he watches. The relationship with the young actress does not last either.

For her part Robin tries a Catholic retreat, where the priest turns out to be a television personality, and considers cosmetic surgery at the hands of the 'Michelangelo of Manhattan.' She meets the producer of a talk show (Joe Mantegna) and he convinces her to come work for him, though she protests that Chaucer is more in her line. The program itself is a zoo, a microcosm of Talk-Show America. Klansmen and mafiosi mingle backstage with ACLU lawyers, comparing notes on talent agencies. When a rabbi shows up, his first concern is that the skinheads might have eaten all the bagels.

More or less by accident, Robin becomes a television star, the host of an interview program. She table-hops for the cameras at an exclusive Manhattan restaurant, exchanging meaningless pleasantries with a real estate broker, a gossip columnist and developer Donald Trump (playing himself), who informs her that he has plans to pull down New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and put up a 'beautiful' new high-rise.

'I've become the woman I've always hated,' explains Robin, 'but I'm happier.' On her wedding day she disappears right before the ceremony and ducks in to get her fortune told by Olga the Psychic Reader. She has misgivings about the course of her life. You can tell a lot about a society, she observes, by those it chooses to celebrate.

At the premiere of the film we saw being made in the first scene Robin, now married, and Lee meet up. She's a star of

sorts, he's a failure. He sits in the audience, forlorn, and watches as the actress on screen rushes across the pavement and glances up at the word formed by an airplane's skywriting. 'HELP,' it says.

Allen's criticisms are legitimate. Television, movies, newspapers and magazines are mostly filled with meaningless chatter. People become famous for no good reason. Literacy is on the decline. Good books, by and large, go unread. The sensitive and the insightful go largely unrecognized. Official discourse is vulgar and shallow. Standing on principle is considered bizarre. Money and youth and fame are everything. The director deserves credit for pointing to these undeniable, but rarely mentioned facts of life.

Branagh is perhaps a better actor in the films he doesn't direct and Allen, in general, directs more effectively when he doesn't act. Here they've combined for an intelligent piece of work. This is, after all, a picture of a portion of the New York intelligentsia, such as it is, in 1998: disoriented, self-absorbed, spineless and corrupt. How could anyone deny the essential truth of this portrait?

The debasement of American public life, politics and culture disturbs certain people, and not others. *Celebrity* has come under sharp attack.

Maureen Dowd, in her November 29 column in the *New York Times*, 'Sex And Self-Pity,' compares Allen to Bill Clinton. She writes: 'I go to work, and I feel trapped in Bill Clinton's libido. I go to the movies, and I feel trapped in Woody Allen's libido. Neither place is a pretty place to be.'

Dowd has made a name for herself as the *Times'*s high priestess of morality in the Clinton-Starr affair, helping to provide a veneer of liberal righteousness to the conspiracy of the ultra-right.

The venom of her piece on *Celebrity* perhaps in part expresses frustration over the fact that the general public has made clear its displeasure with the impeachment drive and has rejected the New Puritanism propounded by the columnist and others. In any event, she can barely control herself on the subject of Allen's film: 'It is utterly mystifying that respected actors--and worse, respected actresses--are still so flattered to appear in Woody Allen's nasty little indulgences of his own bile. A casting call from Mr. Allen is just an invitation to degradation.' Later: 'His new film is a veritable anthology of erotic tackiness.' And further: 'The movie is itself a sex scandal...'

There is sexuality in *Celebrity*, some of it is even degrading sexuality. So what? These matters, including the director's attitude toward them, are aspects of life. Dowd apparently would like to revive the American social climate of the 1880s and 1890s when Anthony Comstock and his Society for the Suppression of Vice held sway, the social climate against which Mencken and Dreiser did battle for decades.

One could ignore these stupid and philistine comments if they had not been echoed in a number of quarters. Reviewers in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Village Voice* and the *Times* itself reproduced Dowd's hostility, if not perhaps the same degree of venom. A great deal of it seems subjective and petty, the result perhaps of past squabbles and hurt feelings. The feminist establishment is also at work here, or at least the fear of offending it. One catches a glimpse of the inner mental workings of a certain social layer. It is worth taking special note of Charles Taylor's review in *Salon*.

Taylor has a long list of charges against Allen in *Celebrity*. He accuses the director of casting talented actors in 'nondescript parts that don't require anything of them'; he suggests that Allen has never 'been interested in anything besides Woody Allen'; he asserts that Allen's attack on celebrity is hypocritical [I thought his only subject was Woody Allen] because he is himself a celebrity; he criticizes Allen for not making the 'perks of fame' sufficiently luscious so that 'it would be obvious why people go after them.'

The last point is significant. Taylor argues as a defender of the world Allen is attacking. The scene in which Branagh and the supermodel go dancing disturbs him in particular. He writes that the director is 'terrified to entertain the possibility that--heaven forfend--this way of life might actually offer some kicks.' He complains that Allen is only intent on using the model 'as an amoral airhead symptomatic of society's ills.' Taylor later, in regard to the Judy Davis character, writes, 'The notion that someone would willingly give up the self-awareness of high culture for shallower comforts and be happy with the choice seem unthinkable to Allen.' If that's so, he's to be congratulated.

Is Woody Allen self-absorbed? Yes. Does the director suffer from a lack of self-criticism, in the sexual and nearly every other arena? Yes. Aren't nearly all his films, including his better ones, marred by trivia, dead spots, childishness, too many jokes that go nowhere? Yes. Isn't he ... ? Aren't his films ... ? Didn't he ... ? Yes. Yes. Yes. One can make all sorts of arguments against Allen and his films, but the fact remains that here he is entirely in the right in his critique of a mindless, hedonistic, success-obsessed culture. Any genuine opponent of the status quo would welcome this film.