

Whatever Works: The results are unattractive

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Written and directed by Woody Allen

The most recent effort from Woody Allen, *Whatever Works*, is a very poor film, unconvincingly and even cartoonishly written and performed, accomplished with little humor or grace. The filmmaker is not able to represent one of the major characters as an actual, living human being. Watching the movie is a largely painful experience.

Boris Yelnikoff (Larry David), a middle-aged, self-proclaimed “genius,” once considered for a Nobel Prize in physics, lives on his own—after a bitter divorce—in New York City. Now earning a small income teaching chess to children, he rails against his fellow creatures, calling them “inchworms,” “cretins” and worse. A young runaway from Mississippi, Melodie (Evan Rachel Wood), turns up at Boris’s Lower Manhattan door, homeless, and he very reluctantly takes her in. Feelings ultimately develop between them.

In the course of events, Melodie’s estranged mother (Patricia Clarkson) and father (Ed Begley, Jr.)—devout and backward Christians—each show up and undergo a radical change in lifestyle and attitude in the more permissive urban environment. Melodie will drift away from Boris, but the latter has a last-minute stroke of luck in love.

There’s so little here, one is somewhat at a loss.

Whatever Works might have had a minimum of dramatic and psychological plausibility if Boris had been created as a more complex and engaging character. If he were a brilliant physicist, bitter and disillusioned by the world and humanity, a recluse, brought out of himself somewhat by contact with life and youth...well, it is not precisely fresh, but perhaps there would have been the opportunity to comment on the different generations and their respective difficulties.

As it is, Boris has nothing about him that suggests genius in any field. Human beings compartmentalize themselves to a remarkable degree, but a touch of the “divine” in any sphere will make itself felt, for better or worse, in other areas of behavior. Here, so obviously, is a mediocre, self-involved, middle class New Yorker, or the dreary caricature of one.

The less said about the trio of “Mississippi” characters, the better. It is certainly not Evan Rachel Wood’s fault that she is obliged to deliver inane lines in a permanently high-pitched, little-girl monotone of a voice. And when unfortunate Henry Cavill, as her new love interest, is added in, with his own peculiarly stilted intonation (again, not the performer’s fault!),

one simply has to avert one’s eyes from the screen out of embarrassment for the actors. Flat, awkward, irritating, self-conscious...are adjectives that come to mind.

Allen apparently wrote a version of this script 30 years ago for Zero Mostel, the actor and blacklist victim. Perhaps the latter, an enormous comic talent and a deeply humane figure, might have done something with the material at the time.

If Boris were a brilliant misanthrope, homing in on humanity’s weaknesses, and such characters have been created in the past, one could forgive him a good deal. But Allen’s character is not that. His Boris is a grubby, repetitive, abrasive individual, who never offers a serious insight. “Shut up!” and “Stop that!” are among his favorite expressions.

These are examples of his wit: “Let’s face it, our marriage hasn’t been a garden of roses. Botanically speaking, you are more of a Venus Flytrap.” “People make life so much worse than it has to be, and believe me, it’s a nightmare without their help.” “I’m a man with a huge world view—I’m surrounded by microbes.” “In America they have summer camps for everything. Rich kids, basketball camp, magic camp, tennis camp, movie director camp—they should have a concentration camp. Two weeks mandatory for all kids growing up, so that they could finally understand what the human race is capable of.” It isn’t funny, or sharp-edged, or much of anything.

The protagonist’s angst and disgust for humanity are transparently superficial and self-serving. People are rotten: “We’re a failed species,” life is “cruel and pointless,” etc. But Boris (Allen) is far too comfortable with himself and his surroundings to make much of this believable. It is affectation, facile, and a means of diverting one’s attention from concretely looking at what makes people miserable, while the complainant continues sipping his latte and reading the *Sunday New York Times*, of course with a sigh.

And this is all undercut, in any event, by a silly happy ending for everyone involved, once it turns out that the secret to life is “chance” and “luck.” In a final speech, Boris tells us, “Whatever love you can get and give, whatever happiness you can provide, every temporary measure of grace—whatever works!”

One simply has the impression of a filmmaker and a personality utterly overwhelmed by developments, both personal and social, with painfully little on which to fall back. Allen’s collapse is as complete, in its own peculiar fashion, as

that of European art film directors and former leftists Jean-Luc Godard or Bernardo Bertolucci.

Allen told a recent press conference: “Life is quite terrible, as you can see by what goes on.... The real world is as horrible, or actually much more horrible, than the world that Boris envisions. He has compassion, and feels bad about this. But the world out there...you can’t pick up the paper in the morning without a carload of atrocities.”

Under such circumstances, one is indeed obliged to clutch at straws. The “last eight years,” Allen commented, have been “catastrophic,” but “now we’re entering into at least a period of some hope, of some human possibilities for the country...we’ve made progress, and elected our first African-American president.”

So. The superficial and conventional filmmaking is bound up with superficial and conventional conceptions about the world.

We have made the point before: it is impossible to detach Woody Allen’s decline, notwithstanding its individual twists and turns, from the general fate of considerable numbers of quasi-cultured, semi-bohemian, once-liberal, upper middle class New Yorkers in particular.

Intellectually unprepared for complex social problems, culturally shallow, ego-driven and a bit (or more than a bit) lazy, exclusively oriented toward the Democratic Party and other institutions of order, distant from or hostile toward broad layers of the population, inheriting family wealth or enriching themselves in the stock market and real estate boom...for a good many, the accumulated consequences of the past several decades have not been attractive.

Allen’s last substantial film, in my view, was *Husbands and Wives*, released in 1992. A great many things have happened since.

The “police riot” of September 1992 at City Hall and the World Trade Center bombing in early 1993 helped set the stage for the election of Republican Rudolph Giuliani as New York mayor in November 1993, on a right-wing, law-and-order platform. At the time, Giuliani picked up the support of a healthy portion of Manhattan’s “cultured,” who hoped someone would get the homeless off the streets and subways.

Income inequality grew rapidly between 1992 and 1999 in the country’s largest city. A 2001 study, for example, found “by the end of the decade, inequality in New York was far higher than [in] the nation as a whole and in any other single state.... Rising income inequality has been spurred by rapid income gains among the top fifth of New Yorkers and stagnant incomes among the poorest fifth. Most income growth went to the 5 percent at the very top of the earnings scale.”

By the end of the 1990s, high-income families in New York City earned 22.9 times their low-income counterparts, compared with 17.7 times in 1992. “The average high-income family could expect to earn in two years what a low-income family would earn in more than 45 years.”

Wealth—along with a threatening social gap—tends to make

people see the world differently. Social tension works on the individual nervous system too. In each life the stakes somehow become greater. It is less easy to laugh at the universe’s foibles, and one’s own, when bank accounts and property holdings are growing. Imperceptibly at first, the focus of anger shifts. The establishment, it turns out, is not the biggest problem, after all—humanity is weak, failed. What good would it do to change the way things are, people would wreck it anyway?

The social trends in New York continued into the next decade. In 2005, Manhattan was home to the wealthiest U.S. census tract with a household income of \$188,697, as well as the poorest, where household income was \$9,320. A commentator noted: “New York City’s borough of Manhattan is the richest county in the United States. In particular, ZIP code 10021 on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, with over 100,000 inhabitants and a per capita income of over \$90,000, has one of the largest concentrations of extreme wealth in the United States.”

In October 2007, the wealthiest individual in New York, oil tycoon David H. Koch, was reportedly worth \$17 billion, more than the city’s 1.5 million poorest residents combined. As of 2009, New York regained first spot on the list of cities with the most billionaires—winning the distinction back from Moscow—with 55. One of those is the mayor, Michael Bloomberg.

Woody Allen lives on the Upper East Side. In early 2004, he turned down offers of \$23 and \$20 million, respectively, for his Georgian townhouse, a “22-room mansion,” on East 92nd Street. He was asking \$27 million.

None of this alone explains the filmmaker’s evolution. There are numerous factors, including Allen’s personal tribulations and responses to them, as well as his limited artistic training and outlook. Nonetheless, the social trends speak very loudly.

Whether the filmmaker participated, or partially participated, in the shift to the political right by a privileged social layer, or, on the contrary, attempted to preserve his liberal views and found less and less support for them within his milieu, events have conspired to knock the stuffing out of him. And his genuine amusement with life, and the ability to amuse....



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