

Woody Allen's *Magic in the Moonlight*: Keeping life at a distance

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Written and directed by Woody Allen

The latest film by Woody Allen, *Magic in the Moonlight*, is set in the late 1920s. A famed magician, Stanley Crawford (Colin Firth), who performs under the name (and in the guise) of Wei Ling Soo, is introduced to us during a triumphant appearance in Berlin. Backstage, though, he is rude to his assistants and arrogant with the public.

An old friend and fellow illusionist, Howard Burkan (Simon McBurney), turns up after the show. He tells Stanley about a young female clairvoyant who has convinced members of the wealthy American family, the Catledges, that she has supernatural powers. Stanley pledges to unmask her as a fraud, as he has done with many others.

Once at the Catledges' villa on the French Côte d'Azur, however, Stanley also falls rapidly under the spell of Sophie Baker (Emma Stone), who has charmed Brice Catledge (Hamish Linklater) into asking her to marry him. Under the influence of "mental impressions," Sophie comes out with intimate details about Stanley and about his beloved aunt Vanessa (Eileen Atkins), who lives not too far away. He cannot figure out how Sophie does it.

Eventually, Stanley is forced to concede publicly that his lifelong dismissal of the "spirit world" and everything metaphysical has been a terrible mistake. He even considers praying for the recovery of his aunt after she's injured in an auto accident.

Then, he has second thoughts about his newfound faith ... and events proceed from there.

Allen's new film is largely stillborn. With more sadness than anger, one has to report that *Magic in the Moonlight* is largely devoid of wit, charm or "magic" of any kind.

Taken at face value, the film's central themes are fairly appalling. In its opening portion, Allen stacks the deck entirely in favor of irrationalism and hostility to reason and science. Stanley, we are encouraged to believe, is

humorless and grim because he doesn't believe in an "unseen" world of spirits and such. His conversation regularly includes gloomy pronouncements from Thomas Hobbes and Friedrich Nietzsche. Sophie, on the other hand, is all liveliness and sensuality, as she introduces a ray of sunshine into Stanley's sad, cramped existence.

In the end, *Magic in the Moonlight* decides to come out against the supernatural. (Thank Heaven for small mercies!) It turns out the irrational element that Stanley should let into his life, after all, is love and romance. Banality rules the day.

In any event, why Stanley's skeptical attitude toward the "beyond" in the first sections of the film should make him miserable and unsociable is unclear. The opposite, of course, is the general rule. Those convinced that we have to make something of *this life*, and not patiently wait for the *next one*, tend to find pleasure here on earth. Religious belief has always been associated with asceticism, the repudiation of "the flesh," and so forth.

As Marxist critic Aleksandr Voronsky suggested, religion—with which the occult is inevitably linked—"renounces the struggle for this world on earth. It abstracts away from all that is concrete, and by so doing strips the world of its most prominent sensual beauty." The artist-materialist, he argued, finds and creates "paradise" in concrete, "living reality."

But, again, the "arguments" in *Magic in the Moonlight* are so half-hearted and unconvincing that one sticks one's neck out in even discussing them seriously. This is a film, unfortunately, in which *nothing* means very much. Awkward bits of exposition alternate with oddly (and flatly) blurted out opinions and feelings. For a film written and directed by an individual supposedly devoted to Freud and psychoanalysis, *Magic in the Moonlight* lacks virtually any emotional complexity, and none of the characters show any sign of genuine inner conflict. This is the level of it:

X: “Existence is bleak.” Y: “No, it’s not, it’s beautiful.” [A few minutes later.] X: “Yes, you’re right, it’s not bleak, it’s beautiful.”

Lest the reader think I’m grossly exaggerating, here are a few samples of the dialogue.

At an observatory, where Stanley and Sophie have taken shelter from the rain, he remarks: “My aunt used to bring me here as a boy. The roof opens up and the universe is menacing.” She replies: “You find that menacing? I say it looks pretty romantic.” He takes the point.

As Stanley, for some unknown reason, is relatively easily allowing himself to be convinced of Sophie’s psychic powers, he reveals his growing conviction to his aunt: “The more I watch her, the more I’m stunned. Could she be real? I’m beginning to question my own common sense.” Aunt Vanessa: “You’ve always been so certain about the world, and I’ve always tried to teach you that we don’t know.”

Stanley is won over: “I’m overwhelmed, Sophie. I never thought you could be this beautiful ... I believed that the dull reality of life is all there is, but you are proof that there’s more, more mystery, more magic.”

As noted above, nothing means very much in *Magic in the Moonlight*. Howard Burkan commits a major betrayal of his old friend Stanley, leading the latter to repudiate the ideas of a lifetime and opening him up to public humiliation. In one of the next scenes, the pair are having a drink in the bar as though nothing has happened! When the film’s creator treats the figures and actions he has set into motion so carelessly, so cavalierly, why in the world should we take them to heart?

The actors do their best. Colin Firth and Emma Stone in particular, in quite different ways, are appealing performers. It is sometimes painful, however, to watch them trying to inject some life and energy into the goings-on.

Banking on a reputation achieved through comic-artistic success years ago, Allen continues to be able to attract some of the leading actors of the day. But to what end? Over the past decade or so, the writer-director has engaged many talented and intriguing performers, and wasted their talents for the most part on one trivial project after another.

The list includes Christina Ricci, Stockard Channing, Chloë Sevigny, Jonny Lee Miller, Amanda Peet, Jonathan Rhys Meyers, Matthew Goode, Brian Cox, Emily Mortimer, Scarlett Johansson, Hugh Jackman, Julian Glover, Charles Dance, Ewan McGregor, Colin Farrell, Sally Hawkins, Tom Wilkinson, Rebecca Hall, Javier

Bardem, Penélope Cruz, Evan Rachel Wood, Patricia Clarkson, Ed Begley Jr., Gemma Jones, Pauline Collins, Anthony Hopkins, Naomi Watts, Josh Brolin, Freida Pinto, Antonio Banderas, Philip Glenister, Rachel McAdams, Michael Sheen, Alison Pill, Tom Hiddleston, Kathy Bates, Marion Cotillard, Léa Seydoux, Adrien Brody, Judy Davis, Alec Baldwin, Jesse Eisenberg, Cate Blanchett, Bobby Cannavale and Peter Sarsgaard, among others.

Woody Allen’s new film seems very distant from life, including his own life. Over the course of the past year, Allen was the subject of a scurrilous campaign undertaken by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof. In February, Kristof, a tireless crusader for “humanitarian intervention” wherever US imperialist geostrategic interests are at stake, lent credence to unproven, 20-year-old allegations of molestation made by Allen’s adopted daughter, Dylan Farrow. Kristof devoted a piece in the *Times* essentially to smearing Allen’s name. This was picked up and taken farther by various pseudo-left moralists and hysterics in the *Nation* and elsewhere.

No artist is obliged to respond directly to the difficulties and traumas of his or her own life. But the issues involved in the Kristof affair were not simply Allen’s personal ones. The rottenness and venality of the media; its eagerness to launch and pursue witch-hunts; its hypocrisy; its contempt for democratic principles—all of this is surely a possible, and even tempting, subject for a drama, or a comedy, however transmuted artistically. It is worth noting that Roman Polanski, who has had his share of difficulties, is currently at work on a film about the Dreyfus affair.

But Allen seems too self-absorbed and too limited at present to be able to bring into his filmmaking the central dilemmas of our time, even when they involve him directly. So, as a consequence, his work resembles life less and less. It seems a pity.



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