

Wonder Wheel: Woody Allen's latest film—and the campaign to drive him out of the film industry

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Written and directed by Woody Allen

Wonder Wheel is 82-year-old director Woody Allen's 49th film. The movie, set in the 1950s, involves four characters whose unhappy lives become entwined in Coney Island—New York City's iconic amusement park.

It was not possible earlier this year to review Ridley Scott's *All the Money in the World* without confronting the issue of the scandalous decision to “delete” Kevin Spacey from that film after its completion. Similarly, one cannot discuss *Wonder Wheel* without taking into account the ongoing effort, in the name of the anti-sexual misconduct campaign, to blackball Allen and drive him out of the film industry.

This deplorable endeavor has been taken up by numerous performers who have worked with Allen in the past, including Mira Sorvino, Greta Gerwig, Michael Caine and Colin Firth. More about that later.

Allen's enduring reputation stems largely from his marvelous work as a stand-up comic in the 1960s and certain intriguing films he directed in the 1970s and 1980s. His movies in recent decades have been flat as a rule and lacking in urgency. But even within this overall process, there have been ups and downs, and *Wonder Wheel* has a bit more liveliness to it than some of Allen's recent efforts.

First, it's set in Brooklyn in the 1950s, in the place where—and at a time when—the director was growing up. This may help account for the fact that the characters here are less complacent and economically well-fixed.

The film opens with a visually striking overview of Coney Island and its giant Ferris wheel. Mickey (Justin Timberlake), a lifeguard and college playwriting student, is the narrator and observes that the amusement park is getting seedier “as the tide rolls in and out.”

Ginny (Kate Winslet) is a moody, frustrated waitress stuck in a loveless marriage to Humpty (Jim Belushi), a gruff merry-go-round operator. Just scraping by, they live in a cramped apartment in the shadow of the Ferris wheel, constantly exposed to the park's noise and commotion. While Ginny grieves over the dissolution of her first marriage, Humpty mourns the death of his first wife. Once an actress, Ginny has traded in her dreams for a tenuous stability that involves monitoring Humpty's alcoholism and suppressing her revulsion at his crude habits.

Both Ginny and Humpty have a child from a first marriage: she, an adolescent son who reacts to his dysfunctional environment by setting fires, including in the office of his therapist; Humpty has an adult daughter, Carolina (Juno Temple), whom he disowned when she married a gangster.

Overripe for a change, Ginny begins an obsessive affair with the younger Mickey, who muses “the dramatist in me sensed something very interesting...she's very pretty but somewhere there's a tragic flaw.” At one point Ginny weakly jokes that Mickey would have thwarted her fantasy suicide attempt: “You would have dived in and ruined my finale.”

Relationship dynamics change when Carolina shows up, attempting to escape the clutches of her mafia husband and his henchmen. She fears for her life because she knows “where all the bodies are buried.” While her unexpected appearance rejuvenates Humpty, Ginny begins to realize that Mickey—the source of her fleeting happiness—is smitten with the young woman. (“I believe in love at first sight, maybe because I'm a writer and I over-romanticize...the heart has its own hieroglyphics”).

Oblivious to Ginny's affair with Mickey, Carolina tries to comfort the older woman on her fortieth birthday. “It's a milestone,” she says. To which Ginny replies: “It's a tombstone.”

In an act of desperation, Ginny has a hand in removing her rival.

One of the more positive features of *Wonder Wheel* is Vittorio Storaro's stunning cinematography, adding a special vividness to the fairly pedestrian melodrama. The award-winning Italian cinematographer has a long list of credits, including *The Conformist*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *1900*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Reds*, *Bulworth* and *Goya in Bordeaux*.

Additional brightening is provided by featured songs “Coney Island Washboard,” a 1932 hit for The Mills Brothers, and Jo Stafford's 1952 release, “You Belong To Me.”

Atypically, Allen has created his idea of “working class” characters and their accompanying economic woes. While the individuals are not generally endearing, there is less snobbery and less of an embalmed quality to *Wonder Wheel* than there has been too much of in the writer-director's recent work. The characters may not be terribly true to reality and remain schematic, but at least they *hint* at reality somewhere in the distance. If the director had been able to pay more concrete and *serious* attention to the internal and external dilemmas of its leads, his most recent film would be a far better work.

As it is, *Wonder Wheel* does not take on an important existence of its own. Allen's self-conscious touch makes itself felt here too. Timberlake's Mickey, the only middle class character in the movie, is wise and semi-erudite, hovering dispassionately above the fray, while the talented Winslet, energetically wrestles with a part that has no genuine texture or depth. References to Eugene O'Neill's overheated psychological dramas, in which the characters devour each other, are

largely extraneous.

Then there is the Ferris wheel, a major Coney Island attraction, presumably meant to symbolize, in a somewhat trite fashion, the eternal “circle of life”—the endless cycle of love and betrayal, desire and disappointment. (In this context, the implied link to Max Ophüls’ *La Ronde* [1950], with its merry-go-round motif and series of interconnected characters, does not lead much of anywhere.)

But *Wonder Wheel* certainly does not deserve the critical slamming it has received. The hypocrites who praised to the skies Allen films as weak as or weaker than this have suddenly discovered all his artistic failings. How convenient! Just in time to be on the “right side” of a witch-hunt.

As noted above, it’s impossible to discuss *Wonder Wheel* without taking up the campaign against Allen. His adoptive daughter Dylan Farrow has accused him of sexually assaulting her when she was a child. Allen strenuously denies the charges and alleges that his former lover, Mia Farrow, cooked up the assault allegation in revenge for his leaving her in favor of Soon-Yi Previn, another of Farrow’s adoptive daughters. The Connecticut State’s Attorney looked into the accusation, and decided not to press charges, while the New York Department of Social Services found “no credible evidence” to support the allegation.

Dylan Farrow has repeated her claim, backed by disreputable figures such as “human rights imperialism” crusader Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, and in the current semi-hysterical atmosphere has found new support.

The *Times* is leading the charge on this as on every front of the sexual misconduct campaign. A January 28 article was clearly looking for a negative answer to the question in its headline, “Can Woody Allen Work in Hollywood Again?” It observed, “Hollywood says it’s done with Harvey Weinstein, James Toback, Kevin Spacey and other figures ousted for misconduct through the #MeToo movement. But what about Woody Allen?”

The article, by Melena Ryzik and Brooks Barnes, gleefully noted that Allen’s last four films “have flopped at the North American box office, taking in a cumulative \$26.9 million—roughly half of which goes to theater owners—while carrying a collective \$85 million in estimated production costs, not including marketing.

“Poor reviews have played a role. But box office analysts say that women, in particular younger women, have grown increasingly determined to boycott his films since 2013, when Dylan Farrow first spoke in detail about her claims of abuse in an interview with *Vanity Fair*.”

The authors found a couple of Allen defenders, including actor Alec Baldwin, who has made a number of principled statements. In January, Baldwin tweeted, “Woody Allen was investigated forensically by two states (NY and CT) and no charges were filed. The renunciation of him and his work, no doubt, has some purpose. But it’s unfair and sad to me.” He added that he had worked with Allen three times “and it was one of the privileges of my career.”

Another was Cherry Jones, the Tony- and Emmy-winning actress who appears in Allen’s soon-to-be-completed movie, *A Rainy Day in New York*. “There are those who are comfortable in their certainty. I am not. I don’t know the truth,” she told the *Times*. “When we condemn by instinct our democracy is on a slippery slope.”

However, there is a much longer list of performers who have jumped on the anti-Allen bandwagon:

One of the most recent condemnations comes from Michael Caine, who won an Oscar for his role in Allen’s 1986 *Hannah and Her*

Sisters. Caine essentially accused the filmmaker of being a pedophile.

Griffin Newman tweeted that he regretted his “one-scene role” in *A Rainy Day in New York*. Rebecca Hall, who starred in Allen’s 2008 film *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, said in an Instagram post that she also regretted her role in *A Rainy Day in New York*, as did Timothée Chalamet.

In November, Ellen Page wrote a Facebook post in which she stated that the “biggest regret” of her career was working on *To Rome With Love*. David Krumholtz foully tweeted that “I deeply regret working with Woody Allen on *Wonder Wheel*. It’s one of my most heartbreaking mistakes. We can no longer let these men represent us in entertainment, politics, or any other realm. They are beneath real men.”

Lady Bird director Greta Gerwig, who worked on *To Rome With Love*, told the *Times* that she would not work with Allen again: “If I had known then what I know now, I would not have acted in the film. I have not worked for him again, and I will not work for him again.”

Mira Sorvino wrote an open letter to Dylan Farrow for *HuffPost*. She expressed regret for working with Allen in his 1995 *Mighty Aphrodite*, despite winning an Oscar and a Golden Globe: “I will never work with him again. I am sorry it has taken me a few weeks to come out in support of you since that conversation, but it has been a process for me to own this truth and make this irrevocable break.”

Rachel Brosnahan also expressed regret about working with Allen in his Amazon TV series, *Crisis in Six Scenes*. Colin Firth, who starred in Allen’s 2014 *Magic in the Moonlight*, told the *Guardian*, “I wouldn’t work with him again.” Hayley Atwell, whose debut role was in Allen’s 2007 film *Cassandra’s Dream*, also told the *Guardian*: “I didn’t know back then what I know now. Would I work with him now? No. And I stand in solidarity with his daughter and offer an apology to her if my contribution to his work has caused her suffering or made her feel dismissed in any way. It’s exciting that I can say this now and I’m not going to be blacklisted.”

It is Woody Allen who is being blacklisted. These comments are cowardly and anti-democratic, worthy of the tradition of Elia Kazan and the rest of the Hollywood informers in the 1940s and 1950s. Whatever his artistic failings, Allen has every right to make his films. The attempts by the self-proclaimed morality guardians to demolish his decades-long career are deeply shameful and will come to be seen as that in the future.



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