Woody Allen's *A Rainy Day in New York*: A little more of an edge than usual

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16 May 2020

The peculiar status of Woody Allen's *A Rainy Day in New York* as the highest-earning film at the global box office last week is a by-product of the ongoing, raging coronavirus pandemic.

With most of the world's movie theaters closed, the relative success of Allen's film in South Korea, where cinemas have re-opened, helped place it in the top spot. The film has earned some $21 million worldwide since its release in 2019, primarily in France, Italy, Spain, Russia, Brazil, Mexico and Greece. *A Rainy Day in New York* is scheduled to open in the UK on June 5.

Allen's movie, featuring Timothée Chalamet, Elle Fanning, Selena Gomez, Liev Schreiber, Diego Luna, Jude Law, Cherry Jones and Rebecca Hall, treats the adventures of a few young people one wet weekend in New York.

Chalamet plays Gatsby Welles, a college student from a wealthy family, who would prefer to play poker and hang out in darkened, sophisticated piano bars rather than pursue an "appropriate" profession. He has planned to spend a few semi-illicit days in New York with his girl-friend, Ashleigh Enright (Fanning), a student journalist, who has in turn arranged an interview with a well-known film director. When Ashleigh becomes distracted and pursued by the director and other film figures, Gatsby takes up with the contrary, impertinent younger sister of an old girl-friend, Chan Tyrell (Gomez). The film is a little livelier and has more bite to it than Allen's other recent, often dispiriting efforts.

Disgracefully, *A Rainy Day in New York* has been suppressed in the US, although it can be obtained on DVD. The film was completed in 2018, but Amazon Studios refused to distribute it. Allen sued Amazon in February 2019 for failing to distribute the already completed film and breaking a four-film agreement.

When the studio shelved the film, it claimed, according to Allen's lawyers, that Amazon's fulfillment of the agreement had become "impracticable" because of "supervening events, including renewed allegations against Mr. Allen, his own controversial comments, and the increasing refusal of top talent to work with or be associated with him in any way."

These were references to the launch of the #MeToo campaign in October 2017 and the renewed accusations by Allen's daughter, Dylan Farrow, of sexual molestation, charges that had long ago been investigated and discredited. Allen's "controversial comments" included the observation that unsubstantiated accusations of sexual misconduct had created a "witch-hunt atmosphere."

In May 2019, Amazon reportedly returned US distribution rights to *A Rainy Day in New York* to Allen, and the $68 million breach of contract lawsuit was settled out of court in November of last year. The American media has not murmured a complaint about the virtual blacklisting of Allen, along with that of Roman Polanski, whose film *J'accuse* has also been blocked from distribution in the US.

The #MeToo intimidation factor induced several of the performers in *A Rainy Day in New York* to express remorse about their participation, including Chalamet, Gomez and Hall. In his autobiography, *Apropos of Nothing*, Allen asserts that although Chalamet publicly stated he regretted working with the director and was giving his salary to charity, "he [Chalamet] swore to my sister he needed to do that as he was up for an Oscar for *Call Me by Your Name*, and he and his agent felt he had a better chance of winning if he denounced me, so he did."

Hall later explained to the *Globe and Mail* in Canada, "I've been deliberate in saying that the choice wasn't making a judgment one way or another. I don't believe anyone in the public should be judge and jury on a case that is so complex."

Law, to his credit, indicated he thought it was "a terrible shame" the film had not been released as scheduled in the US. "I'd love to see it [the release]. People worked really hard and put a lot in," Law told the *New York Times* in 2018.

Jones, the award-winning stage and film actress, defended Allen to the *Guardian* in April 2019: "I did my homework. I went back and studied every scrap of information I could get about that period. And in my heart of hearts, I do not believe he [Allen] was guilty as charged. ... [T]here are those who are comfortable with their certainty. I am not. I don't know the truth, but I know that if we condemn by instinct, democracy is on a slippery slope."

In his autobiography, the veteran comic-director observes, "As of now, unless some American distributor puts it out here, *A Rainy Day in New York* will not be seen in the USA. Fortunately, the rest of the world remains sane, and it has

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opened all over and is quite successful. It's funny to think of me doing films that are shown in every country but not America." Of course, in reality, there is nothing "funny" about it.

In any event, merely taken at face value, *A Rainy Day in New York* is a rather foolish and implausible work. Chalamet's annoyingly named character doesn't make a great deal of sense, nor do a number of his adventures, including a poker game from which he emerges with thousands of dollars and an unlikely encounter with a beautiful prostitute (Kelly Rohrbach).

Moreover, the combination of trite and largely pointless literary, film and musical references and the by-now tedious celebration of affluent Manhattan that Allen insists upon, portrayed here through a series of ridiculously opulent apartments, hotel rooms and restaurants, have a primarily irritating quality.

In terms of the latter obsession, incidentally, Allen's autobiography sheds light on the degree to which his infatuation with Manhattan began at an early age and had a definite *social* character to it. Brooklyn represented to him his own lower middle-class family and its shabby, noisy, inelegant, sometimes impoverished way of life. On the other hand, in *Apropos of Nothing*, Allen describes the type of Manhattan apartment, present in his "favorite films," on which he became and remains fixated.

"I loved stories," he writes, "that took place in penthouses where the elevator opened into the apartment and corks popped, where suave men who spoke witty dialogue romanced beautiful women who lounged around the house in what someone now might wear to a wedding at Buckingham Palace."

Allen continues: "These apartments were big, usually duplexes, with much white space. Upon entering, one or one's guest almost always headed directly to a small, accessible bar to pour decantered drinks. Everybody drank all the time and nobody vomited. And nobody had cancer and the penthouse didn't leak and when the phone rang in the middle of the night, the people high above Park or Fifth Avenue didn't have to, like my mother, drag ass out of bed and bang her knees in the dark groping for the one black instrument and hear maybe a relative just dropped dead."

Despite many of its assumptions and intentions, however, *A Rainy Day in New York* has a degree of feeling and a vigor that make an impact. Partly, this is the result of the youthful if uneven energy provided by Chalamet, Fanning and Gomez. The latter also stood out in James Franco's *In Dubious Battle* (2016), based on John Steinbeck's 1936 novel about a fruit-workers' strike during the Depression. Not doing terribly much, but behaving like a young woman with strong and important feelings just beneath the surface, Gomez gives a moving performance in Allen's film. Her entrance in the final scene, although predictable, provides an understated but emotional jolt that has been largely lacking in Allen's work over the past quarter-century, in all its overwhelming flatness.

Allen takes a satirical-skeptical look at the film world. It is a relatively genial satire, but one is encouraged to see in his mocking of the self-centeredness and egoism of a prominent director (Schreiber), writer (Law) and actor (Luna), shades of the better portions of his *Celebrity* (1998). Elle Fanning, all awkwardness and heart and hands aflutter, sends these gentlemen into even more of a state than she herself is in. They act foolishly and threaten to lose their heads, but nothing earth-shaking or tragic occurs. Allen is certainly kinder to the film industry and its personnel than they were about to be to him.

In a recent interview with *Le Point*, the French weekly news magazine, Allen was asked about the reference in his autobiography to "McCarthyism" in relation to the #MeToo crusade. He noted that the anti-communist purge was a time "when one could denounce one's neighbour with an accusation based on absolutely nothing, and it was useless to try and prove it false. … I remember it a little because, when I was a child, we sometimes learned that so-and-so, on his way to work, had lost his job before he could even defend himself against what he was accused of. … There's a little flavor of it [now]. A lot of actors have told me they were horrified by the obviously unfair reputation I was given, that they were on my side, but when I asked them why they didn't say so openly, they told me they were afraid of the consequences for their careers."

He later told the interviewer, "In fifty years of filmmaking, I have worked with hundreds of actresses and I have never been accused of the slightest inappropriate conduct. All the women were paid the same as the men. So the fact that people never gave me, spontaneously, the benefit of the doubt, that they never said, 'But that's an absolutely crazy accusation,' is something that astounded me. It also came at a time when we are supposed to take the word of women and not so much the point of view of men. It may have played a tiny bit into this slander."

Anyone concerned with elementary democratic rights should be appalled by what's taken place to Allen and to his film.

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