

Woody Allen's *Rifkin's Festival*: A portion of life's complications makes its way through

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Written and directed by Woody Allen

Rifkin's Festival is the latest film from beleaguered writer-director Woody Allen. It follows American film critic Mort Rifkin (Wallace Shawn) in northern Spain in the company of his younger wife Sue (Gina Gershon), a film publicist, while she attends the San Sebastián Film Festival.

At the festival, Sue is working as a press agent for Philippe (Louis Garrel), a French filmmaker whose work Mort does not think much of. As he lets everyone know, Mort has a poor opinion of contemporary cinema in general, preferring the “European masters,” Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, etc. One of the other characters refers to him dismissively as a “cranky little introvert.” Rifkin has been working, unsuccessfully, for years on a novel. He used to teach film in college, which he enjoyed far more than his current work.

In San Sebastián, much to Mort's dismay, Philippe's new “antiwar” film is being celebrated as a masterpiece. Sue and her client spend a good deal of time together, apparently headed toward an affair. Mort seems helpless to do much about it. His wife eventually tells him she wants to end their marriage.

Something of a hypochondriac, Mort seeks out a local doctor when he experiences heart palpitations or some such. A friend suggests Dr. Joanna “Jo” Rojas (Elena Anaya). Once in her presence, Mort finds himself infatuated. He exaggerates or invents a series of minor ailments or medical conditions to have an excuse to see Jo again. Eventually, they spend an idyllic day together in the countryside. When Jo's car breaks down, they make their way to her house, only to discover her painter husband in bed with another woman. Mort fantasizes that Jo might develop feelings for him.

These scenes are interspersed with Mort's musings and dreams about films and filmmaking. *Rifkin's*

Festival includes parodic references to Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, François Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*, Bergman's *Persona* and *The Seventh Seal*, Fellini's *8½* and Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*. Most of this material is toothless, but Christoph Waltz does make a delightful, black-clad appearance as Death (à la *The Seventh Seal*), urging Mort to exercise and watch his cholesterol levels.

This is a slight work. Slight, but not as fatally flat and schematic as Allen's more ambitious and critically better received work during the 2010s: *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, *Midnight in Paris*, *To Rome with Love*, *Blue Jasmine*, *Magic in the Moonlight* and *Irrational Man*, all made for Sony Pictures Classics.

Now, Allen has great difficulty in finding US distribution for his films. *Rifkin's Festival*, also available online, only played in a couple of dozen movie theaters and the vindictive American media gleefully termed it a “flop,” a “bomb,” etc. By comparison, *Midnight in Paris* eventually opened in 944 theaters and *Magic in the Moonlight*, 964.

In the midst of the #MeToo sexual witch-hunt, Allen's adopted daughter Dylan Farrow reiterated her claims that the filmmaker molested her in 1992, when she was seven. The allegations were the subject of investigations by Connecticut and New York authorities that cleared Allen of any wrongdoing decades ago. The vicious, vindictive campaign pursued by actress Mia Farrow against her former lover, Allen, a campaign almost universally adopted by the US media for its own atmosphere-polluting purposes, is largely responsible for his present predicament. In the finest traditions of Hollywood cowardice and opportunism, various figures, who cannot possibly have any serious knowledge of the case, have publicly denounced Allen and pledged not to work with him.

This is how the current sexual McCarthyism operates.

To appear in one of Allen's films at present has the character of taking a courageous political stand. Gershon told Chicago's WGN that "it serves no one to keep great artists from working, even the alleged victims, right?" She continued: "In this world that we're living in right now it's a little bit tricky to even talk about it because things are pulled apart and put on social media and clickbait, and no one is safe. ... I thought in this country you're innocent until proven guilty, because if the opposite were true, we'd all be canceled basically. That's how I feel. It's a weird time in the world."

Shawn told the same interviewer that he had "familiarized [himself] with this case for quite a while" and thinks that "what Dylan [Farrow] says happened didn't actually happen. ... I feel that Woody Allen is an innocent man, and it's an injustice that we're even talking about this. The legal system has decided he's innocent, so now it's in the court of public opinion."

In a November 2021 open letter, Shawn discussed the accusations against Allen, including the results of the two official probes, and explained that after "carefully" considering the case, "I personally have concluded that Woody didn't commit the crime." Referring to Dylan Farrow, he explained, "I don't believe that the episode she's described ever actually occurred. I've known, admired and loved people who sincerely believed they had personal contact with God, though I myself have always remained a nonbeliever."

French actor Garrel also played a leading role in a film by another director the American media and #MeToo forces have turned into a pariah. Garrel appeared in Roman Polanski's *J'accuse (An Officer and a Spy)*, which shamefully has still not been released in the US.

Allen told the French weekly news magazine *Le Point* in 2020 that the #MeToo crusade bore a resemblance to the Red Scare of the 1950s. He observed that numerous "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."

Rifkin's Festival is a small and uneventful film, but the disintegration of the 86-year-old Allen's career perhaps has had certain positive results. That

unraveling process, the shattering of certain complacent assumptions, has allowed a bit more life and spontaneity to enter into his filmmaking.

In *A Rainy Day in New York* (2019), Allen's previous film, we noted that the film, "a rather foolish and implausible work," was rescued to a certain extent by "the youthful if uneven energy" contributed by Timothée Chalamet, Elle Fanning and Selena Gomez. In particular, Gomez's "entrance in the final scene ... 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."

In *Rifkin's Festival*, things proceed too carelessly, limply, and Mort receives the news that his wife of a good many years wants to leave him in the manner of a patron being told his favorite restaurant is out of breadsticks. The talented Gershon and Garrel, in rather cramped, stereotyped roles, are not given nearly enough to do. On the other hand, there is some fun in watching Wallace Shawn's rumbling and fumbling around San Sebastián and environs. He is livelier and more interesting to watch inhabiting the familiar Allen persona than Allen himself has proven to be in recent years.

And the special "jolt" here is provided by Elena Anaya as Jo, the doctor with an unfortunate husband. Anaya is affecting, as a smart and attractive woman in a sad, difficult situation, and more or less takes over the film and creates much of the interest it has.

It may be that Allen was simply fortunate in his choice of Gomez and Anaya, but it's also possible that his traumas have knocked open a small opening through which a portion of reality's complications has unexpectedly made its way.



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