

# Woody Allen: Still Romantic After All These Years

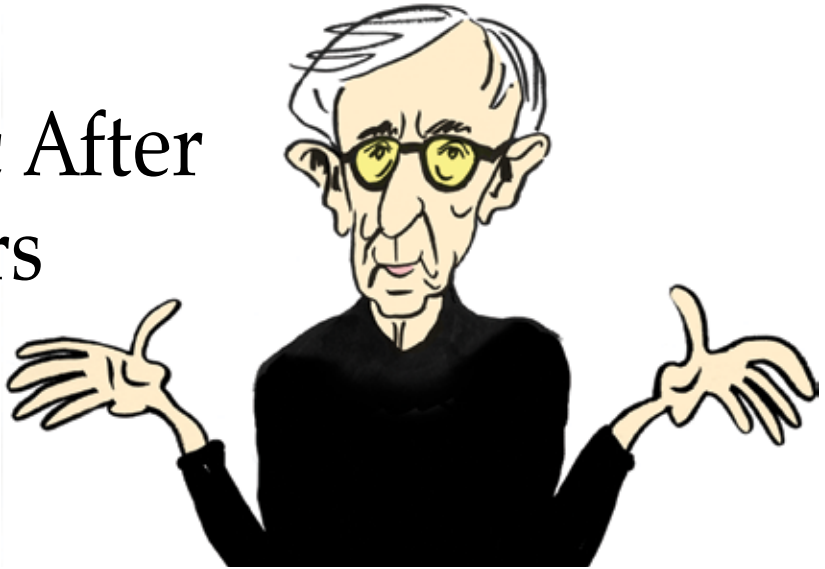


Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

As Woody Allen once put it, “There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is, how far is it from Midtown, and how late is it open?”

Woody does not leave his beloved Manhattan often, famously refusing to travel to the Academy Awards for fear of missing his weekly clarinet gig at the Carlyle Hotel. But on a Sunday afternoon last fall, just a few months before the current imbroglio involving charges of child molestation, this recent Sunday afternoon he drove the 50 miles from Midtown to make a rare public speech in New Jersey. The occasion was the opening of an exhibit of his papers, held by Firestone Library at Princeton University. Allen has donated all his manuscripts and personal papers to Princeton since 1980.

A SRO crowd of 830 waits eagerly as the 78-year-old Allen walks from the wings to the Alexander Hall stage with an English professor who will interview him publicly. He looks somewhat disoriented and even a little fragile, dressed as always in a wool sweater and baggy corduroys. He glances around nervously through his black horn rim glasses. But as soon as he hears the first question — “What did you dream about as a child?” — he lightens up, turns and talks directly to the audience.

“As a kid in Brooklyn,” he begins, “my life was miserable. My parents and I were always quarreling. We were poor, too. I dreamed of the Manhattan I knew from the movies. A beautiful place, filled with parks perfect for people too fall in love. At sunset, interesting people left their beautiful apartments to drink cocktails in posh clubs. They had white telephones beside their beds. We didn’t have that in Brooklyn. Of course, the real Manhattan, where I traveled to every day by bus, couldn’t be more different than this. This was a dangerous city.

If you walked in Central Park, you were likely to be killed. On the streets, people robbed each other in full daylight.”

“In my films, I wanted to capture only those romantic images in my mind. I did this with all my dream cities. *Midnight in Paris* is the Paris where I would like to be in love, and the same goes for *Vicky Christina Barcelona*. My last film, *Blue Jasmine*, reflects my fantasy of San Francisco.”

Someone asks him what it’s like to get older. “Do not let anyone convince you that you will become wiser,” he says. “Nothing beautiful happens. You just get older. I am a romantic soul. I always wanted only one thing with my films — to be able to sit across from a beautiful leading actress. But now I’m too old. Some other guy gets to sit across from Scarlett Johansson and look into her eyes. I could be her grandfather!”

In front of the auditorium sits his wife, Soon-Yi, who is in fact young enough to be his daughter.

“I’ve never been interested in politics,” Woody says. “Only in insoluble matters. The finiteness of life, the sense of futility and despair, and the impossibility of communication. The difficulty of falling in love and staying there.” He runs his hand through his thinning hair, making it even more unruly.

In this wistful and rueful old man, a little boy is still fighting desperately to escape.

Earlier that afternoon I had examined samples of his writings from the 48 boxes of film scripts, plays and letters held by Princeton. There are the handwritten notes he takes to jot down

ideas and sticks into drawers, hoping to be inspired by them later. There is the script of *Manhattan*, written on the Olympia typewriter sold to him in high school by a salesman who promised, “It will outlive you!” He still writes on it, calling a typewriter repairman whenever he needs to change the ribbon.

Then I notice his opening sentences of *Annie Hall*.

“There’s an old joke about two elderly ladies who are in the mountains in a resort. One of them says, ‘Gosh, the food here is really bad.’ The other woman says, “Indeed. And those small portions!”

Then Woody wrote: “That’s how I look at life. A lot of trouble, pain, anxiety and problems. And before you know it’s over.”

As the lecture comes to an end, someone asks him what advice he would have for a 17-year-old just starting out in show business. Woody looks almost pained. “You need to understand the painful fact that success is largely dependent on luck,” he says. “Then give it a fair shot to succeed.”

A woman stands and praises Woody lavishly for all his many contributions, then says, “Oh, I am going on too long!” “No, no,” he says. “Keep going ... You were just getting warmed up!”

At the end, he walks out to a long standing ovation. He then turns twice to gesture his thanks to audience and gives a little bow, his palms turned outwards at his sides.

— Pia de Jong