

Allusions of Grandeur

WHEN AN ART FORM starts to reflect upon itself, does the borrowing indicate maturity or senescence? I don't know. Film artists have copied one another since the very earliest comics in the silents realized that audiences loved chase scenes and so tried to outdo their rivals with ever more frantic eruptions of mayhem. Today's directors, many of them coming out of film schools, are self-conscious historians of cinema. Their hommages deliberately pay tribute to giants of the past. Like true postmodern artists, they rely upon earlier works as much as "reality" for their self-expression. Audiences then become unwitting players in the game. Recognizing familiar shots and scenes can be a distraction, but when such scenes are woven skillfully into the text of a film, they can add appreciably to one's enjoyment. To cite one obvious example, "Love and Death" (1975), Woody Allen's parody of Tolstoy's War and Peace, ends with Death leading the cast in a dance in imitation of Ingmar

Bergman's "The Seventh Seal" (1956). Viewers unfamiliar with Bergman would miss the joke and the point of the scene.

In his most recent movie, **Sweet and Lowdown**, Woody Allen turns from the work of his earlier icon, Bergman, to "La Strada" ("The Road," 1954), a masterpiece of the late Federico Fellini. Allen's transformation of the source material reveals a great deal about both filmmakers. In the earlier film, Zampano (Anthony Quinn) is an itinerant strongman, a brute of a man who travels through the back roads of postwar Italy on his motorcycle and trailer. He stops at crossroads, gathers what audiences he can and with his "lungs of steel" pops open a chain wrapped around his chest. Road and chain provide the defining images for him. He must continue his journey, while trying to reach beyond the chains that bind him in the tight circle of his own ego.

Early in the film, Zampano stops at a seaside village to secure for a modest price a traveling companion, Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina). This simpleminded,

large-hearted mute girl will travel with him as a replacement for her older sister, who has died. The family needs the money. While the road and his chains define the strongman, the sea with its open horizons and infinite fertility mirror Gelsomina. At one point in their journey together, Zampano parks his bike at the edge of the beach and urinates in the water as a sign of his rejection of Gelsomina's world. Only at the end of the film, when he learns of her death, does Zampano realize the saving power of her love. Once again he wades into the waves, but this time he bathes his face in its baptismal waters and weeps in recognition of his lost love. In this final scene, Fellini holds out the hope that this brutal, unloving man has at last found redemption.

Woody Allen tells the same story, but with a very different intent. Employing a documentary style complete with talking-head commentators, one of whom is the filmmaker himself, Allen tells the "true" story of Emmet Ray (Sean Penn), a fictitious jazz guitarist of the 1930's. While playing a gig on the Jersey shore, Emmet and his friend try to pick up girls on the boardwalk. As it turns out, Emmet's date Hattie (Samantha Morton) has lost her speech because of a childhood illness. After their first awkward date, she discovers that she adores Emmet, and she has the added quality of not being able to interrupt him when he boasts about being the second greatest guitarist in the world.

It seems to be a match made in central casting. Emmet explains that he cannot tie himself down by marriage, but such a detail scarcely challenges her devotion and determination to stay with him through thin and thinner. She even takes in laundry to help pay the bills. They take off in his convertible roadster, stopping off for occasional amateur shows in farm country on their way to the big time in Hollywood.

Gelsomina endures and even takes perverse pride in Zampano's success with his female fans, but he needs freedom as much as she needs love. Eventually Zampano drives off without her. Emmet similarly dumps Hattie and marries a glamorous socialite and would-be author



Sean Penn stars in Woody Allen's latest film, "Sweet and Lowdown."

(Uma Thurman), who finds Emmet fascinating material for a book. She soon finds a gangster even more fascinating, however, so their marriage ends as quickly as one can say, "Cheese it! The cops." In time Emmet's travels bring him back to the Jersey shore, where he finds Hattie sitting quietly on the boardwalk eating her lunch. This time he is terribly alone, and almost aware of his loneliness. Of course, he cannot admit his need to Hat-

tie or to anyone else.

At this point, Allen takes the material in a direction radically different from Fellini. The expected reconciliation between the one-time lovers and the consequent redemption for Emmet never take place. Without apology Emmet merely explains his need to keep moving and to remain faithful to his art. Allen, as the commentator, tells us that Emmet simply disappeared from the scene, leav-

ing behind a few recordings that allow us to remember his great talent.

While Fellini was interested in a Catholic story of redemption through love, Allen turns the material into another chapter of his autobiography. As he has argued so often before, the artist creates his own moral universe and has no obligations to anyone or anything beyond his art. Who dares to judge him? Since there is no after-life to make self-sacrifice, generosity or even kindness meaningful, the best the artist can hope for is the ability to leave a few works behind. In this alone resides immortality.

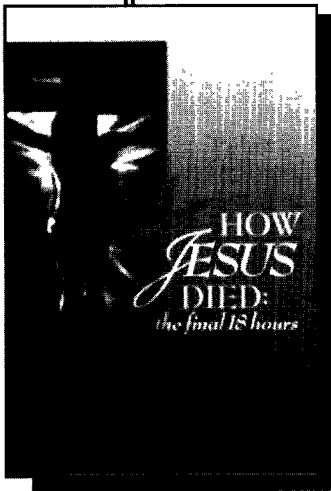
While Allen remains chained to his own ego and his own peculiar moral concerns, just like Zampano (the weakness of the film), he has had the good artistic judgment to allow the edgy character of Sean Penn to create his own version of the Allen surrogate (its undeniable strength). Emmet neither stammers nor frets about the usual Allen library of neuroses. He thrives in his simple world of wine, women and jazz, and although he feels a certain amount of Manhattan angst at the realization that another guitarist in Europe has a reputation as "the best," Emmet never doubts his own abilities. Allen allows us to enjoy his brash self-confidence, while suggesting that it all may be a cover for some vulnerabilities that he cannot bother exploring. Emmet is even less likely to hit a psychiatrist's couch than to jam with Lawrence Welk and the Champagne Lady.

Emmet may have problems, but he is too busy living his life to reflect upon them. In addition to his love of cars and travel, Emmet likes to visit freight yards at night. These giant engines rumble to some unknown but exotic destination, but Emmet never realizes that their journey follows iron rails that determine their route into the future. Such limits scarcely exist for a free spirit like Emmet Ray. He carries a huge, nickel-plated .45, which he uses to shoot at rats in any nearby dump. Crudely, he tosses the carcasses toward his girlfriends, perhaps as an unconscious suggestion of his association with the animal, or a promise that he continues to try to kill the rat that he has become. In any event, this pointless cruelty suggests a streak of hostility toward the world and toward those who might love him.

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John Dauer, Producer/Director, Trinity Pictures

Emmet than Hattie. Samantha Morton, however, brilliantly makes her a survivor rather than a victim. She neither dies, like the original Gelsomina, nor does she become a whimpering neurotic, like so many of the characters Mia Farrow created in earlier Allen films. Gelsomina learns to play the drums and trumpet for her sidekick part in Zampano's threadbare act, but Hattie refuses to transform herself into something she is not in order to enter Emmet's world and earn his love. Silent she is, and silent she will remain, while Emmet as a musician lives in a world of sound. She lands a non-speaking bit part in a Hollywood movie simply because she looks like the kid sister of the star, but realizing that she is no actress, she leaves the studio after one day of shooting. When she finally understands that Emmet is impervious to her love, she simply gets another job in a laundry, knowing quite well that even in the Depression, people still need clean clothes.

A petite woman with an angelic smile to rival Giulietta Masina's, Samantha Morton's Hattie eats like a linebacker. This waif with the golden metabolism can devour a dessert cart while listening to Emmet play, and when her life with him finally falls apart, she wisely opens her sandwich bag and has lunch as she looks out over the surf. In contrast, Gelsomina refuses to eat whenever she realizes that Zampano does not love her. With her perky peach basket hat plopped on her head, Hattie will march through life, preferably with Emmet; but if that doesn't work out, march she will, one way or another. And she'll make sure to pack a lunch for herself.

Preoccupied as he is with self-justification—all the while arguing that the artist needs no justification—Woody Allen seems to suggest here that artists quite possibly hurt those who love them, but their victims can get over it. Life goes on. True artists can create more works of art as their purchase on immortality; their women can always take in laundry and eat lunch.

Like most of Woody Allen's films, "Sweet and Lowdown" explores serious moral and artistic questions in a setting that is both lovely and very funny. The jazz guitar numbers, played by Howard Alden and Bucky Pizzarelli, could stand alone as delightful moments of entertainment that in the context of the film offer some justifi-

cation to Emmet's claim of great musicianship. The entire film is beautifully photographed in faded color and sepia tones by the great Chinese cinematographer Zhao Fei. The misty camera work suggests a scrapbook, in which these vivid, painful memories have somehow grown softer through time's relentless passage.

In one delicious moment of self-revelation, Emmet decides that he towers so far above his fellow musicians that he should be lowered from the ceiling of the nightclub on a plywood and tinsel half-

moon, while they labor on the floor of the stage. Of course, he is so drunk (on his own ego as much as on bourbon) that he falls out of his perch, and the contraption nearly kills him when it comes crashing down behind him. Lesson in point: Beware the dangers of raising yourself above the realm of common mortals, even though you consider yourself a great artist surrounded by snails. If the fall doesn't get you, the artifice might. Did Woody Allen recognize the supreme irony here?

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

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