



PHOTO BY BRIAN HAMILL

Woody Allen and Helena Bonham Carter are husband and wife in **Mighty Aphrodite**.

Something Old

MIGHTY APHRODITE brings Woody Allen back to familiar territory, much to the delight of his fans. It features the appealingly neurotic comic persona that the public often confuses with the thoughtful film maker, the zany comic dialogue that echoes the best of Groucho Marx, the unflinching touch for New York characters and settings and a love story that eventually works itself out. Anyone who enjoys Allen comedy will take delight in this latest offering.

At the risk of oxymoron, no one recycles himself more inventively than Woody Allen. This poses a problem for us perennial Allen watchers. During the 1970's and 1980's, Woody Allen used many of his films—yes, even the very funny comedies—to explore key philosophical and religious issues, at times even daring not to be funny. Then the tabloids exploited his personal life, making him one of the three most important figures of the 1990's, a worthy predecessor of O. J. and now Princess Diana. His post-Mia works, "Manhattan Murder Mystery" and

"Bullets Over Broadway," entertain gloriously, and that is the first obligation of a movie maker; but the edge of intellectual inquiry is gone. In these, he takes standard Hollywood formats of detectives and gangsters and recasts the genres in his own comic style. "Mighty Aphrodite" continues this pattern, even down to the strained, cacophonous title.

This time around, the Screwball Comedy of the 1930's and 1940's provides the generic framework. According to the rubrics of the formula, lovers or husband and wife inhabit different social worlds, and the strain nearly drives them to separation. Remember Tracy and Hepburn, sportswriter and sophisticated politician, in "Woman of the Year" (George Stevens, 1942)? Lenny Winerib (Woody Allen) is also a sportswriter, but his wife, Amanda Sloane (Helena Bonham Carter) manages an art gallery and wants to open her own, a change that involves moving from the comfortable Upper East Side to the wilds of Vesey Street in SoHo. Amanda wants a child, but since her career does not

permit the luxury of pregnancy, she is determined to adopt one ready-made. The correspondences to Allen's actual biography need little exposition.

Very quickly baby Max shows that he has the makings of a prodigy, a sand-box superstar in his preschool program for gifted children. Overwhelmed with curiosity about Max's biological parents, who, he reasons, must be a his-and-hers team of Nobel laureates, Lenny uses his reporter's skills to locate the mother, Linda Ash (Mira Sorvino), a six-foot tall prostitute who longs for starring roles in erotic movies. When Lenny visits her garish apartment, complete with pornographic fish tank and wall clock, they have

different agenda in mind. Is there such a term as counter-seduction? It is a very funny scene. He stammers as he tries to act coolly professional, while she tries to be sultry with a squeaky voice Miss Piggie might envy.

Linda has a one-track mind, exceedingly narrow gauge at that. No Nobel prize lurks under the surface of this gene pool, yet Lenny grows oddly fond of her. Amanda, in the meantime, becomes involved with Jerry Bender (Peter Weller), an oily art dealer who divides his time between SoHo and the Hamptons. These twin attractions might signal an end to a marriage in the real world, but this is Screwball Comedy, and there are other options.

TRYING TO RESCUE the mother of his son from her life of shame, Lenny plays the role of match-maker. He arranges a meeting with Kevin (Michael Rapaport), a young boxer whose career prospects seem limited by his inability to distinguish left from right. "No, Kevin. Left jab!" No mat-

ter, since he wants to return to the family onion farm outside Wampsville, N.Y. (While Allen's New York in-jokes are often lost outside Manhattan, we up-staters hold the advantage on this one. Wampsville, 20 miles east of Syracuse, is the seat of Madison County. Onions are the region's major crop, and the boxing Hall of Fame is located next door in Canastota, home of Carmine Basilio, a middleweight champion of the 1950's. Take that, you supercilious Manhattanites!)

Linda's dream of becoming an onion-farm wife and part-time beautician crumbles when Kevin recognizes his fiancée starring in the porn video his friends have provided for his bachelor party. Everything turns out well for Linda, Kevin and everyone else, thanks in part to a forced landing by a helicopter, which a voice-over properly identifies as a *deus ex machina*.

Woven throughout the film and giving a justification for the title is a chorus modeled on the classical Greek theater. F. Murray Abraham is the caustic leader of the chorus, Cassandra foretells doom at every convoluted turn in the plot (and she is usually right), and Jocasta kvetches about both her son Oedipus and psychiatrists who make \$200 per hour from his problems.

Although the chorus, beautifully filmed in an authentic Greek theater in Sicily, seems to be a daring comic innovation, it is actually a return to "God," Allen's one-act play published in 1975. In this parody of the Greek theater, the artists Hepatitis, Trichinosis and Diabetes wait for Zeus to appear *ex machina* to explain what their play is all about.

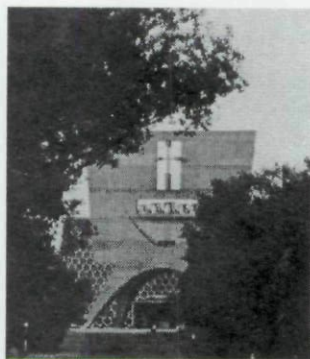
The two forays into Greek literature have significant differences, however. "God" parodies the New Comedy of Menander, while "Aphrodite" lampoons the classic tragedy of Sophocles. Insufferable academic trivia? It may be more than that. While modeling the external forms of his two antecedents, Allen has precisely reversed their content. Menander and friends entertained and did not avoid a bit of ribaldry and social satire to get laughs. In "God" Allen uses their style, gets the crude laughs and at the same time asks about the existence of God and his role in human affairs. By contrast, Sophocles looks hard at basic questions, like guilt, destiny and human responsibility. These matters scarcely clutter the comedic landscape of Sophoclean "Mighty Aphrodite." Allen uses the tragic forms for laughs. Twenty years ago, he could ask serious questions with a comic voice. Now he finds

nothing in tragedy but the occasion for a few jokes.

THE ENDING of "Mighty Aphrodite" is particularly vexing. At his best, Allen resolutely rejects the easy happy resolution of his hero's problems. The main character finds a reason to go on with life and love, if only because of a memory or a hope. In "Mighty Aphrodite," when all the romantic loose ends improbably come together, the

Greek chorus breaks into song: "When you're smilin', the whole world smiles with you." The conclusion is not only non-Sophoclean; it is non-Allen. Neither genes nor environment make any difference. That happiness is luck, or the suggestion that it is even possible with luck, is an idea as unrealistic as the end of this fantasy movie. Cynicism is arthritis of the soul, and the creaking joints suggest why the artist may be walking a bit more slowly in recent days.

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