



## The Blue Planet

From left to right in center, Gretchen Mol, Leonardo DiCaprio, Steve Randazzo and Kenneth Branagh in a scene from Woody Allen's *Celebrity*.

**C**ALLING EARTH. Come in, Blue Planet. Do you read me? Over.”  
 “Er, I mean, I (cough) read you, Nebula Transhudsonia.”

“What’s your situation? We’ve been monitoring your transmissions from the past century. Age of stays and farthingales vanished like many of your past civilizations. First Watergate tapes. Now jokes about Viagra and the stains on Monica’s blue dress. In public. On editorial pages as well as on late night comedy shows. Your females used to refer to their underwear as “unmentionables,” but now they blister Little League umpires with gender-specific obscenities that would melt whalebone. Are you Earthlings so obsessed with procreation that you talk of nothing else and even use the language of procreation about everything from recalcitrant computers to enemy drivers? Are you suffering from a linguistic nervous breakdown. What the [expletive deleted] is happening to you [hyphenated noun deleted] on your [participial phrase deleted] planet?”

“Yeah. You, er, see, it’s like, well, we’re lonely. That’s it. Yeah. Lonely, like, and sad. That’s it, (cough) lonely and sad. It’s like, you know we’ve got the, er, planetary blues.”

*Celebrity* is Woody Allen’s latest riff on his life’s work, which is an ongoing fugue of planetary blues, arranged for solo whine and sexually mixed-up chorus. Some ungracious critics claim that his riparian solar system may be bounded by the Hudson, Harlem and East. Possibly, but this brick and asphalt aviary that stretches from Battery Park to the Cloisters continually yields fascinating, if grotesque specimens for cataloguing by its veteran ornithologist.

Allen’s antiheroes, generally played by himself, search for love and community, which in Allen’s world means a lasting and fulfilling sexual relationship with a beautiful, but apparently unattainable woman. These characters, however, gradually become pathetic in their quest. They stammer and fixate on their own physical and psychological

problems, and they expect the world, including the idealized woman, to sympathize with their narcissism. When she leaves them, as any sane person must, they must console themselves with a memory of past happiness or a hope that things might be better in the future.

In “*Celebrity*” Allen adds a new ingredient. He examines the proposition that fame, based solely on the notion of being famous, provides the yellow brick road to fulfillment. He never denies the thesis. On the contrary, many of the characters in this highly intricate narrative do indeed find contentment in their passing moment of fame. He does, however, undercut his own eudaimonistic proposition by showing that celebrity and its attendant rewards are purely a matter of luck, and therefore must be suspect.

**L**EE SIMON (Kenneth Branagh) is the Woody Allen antihero, even down to



his stammer, baggy corduroy jacket and relentless pursuit of happiness, embodied in a succession of beautiful women. A writer of travel and celebrity pieces for mass circulation magazines and Sunday supplements, Lee merely wants to earn enough to see him through until he achieves fame as a novelist or screenwriter; he's not sure which. Before he appears on screen, the film opens as a sky-writer finishes the word "Help" over the Manhattan skyline. The word will provide the backdrop for a

scene for a movie being shot on a plaza in front of one of those antiseptic office towers on Park Avenue. "Help" will also be Lee's personal statement throughout the film.

Lee watches the scene's star, Nicole Oliver (Melanie Griffith), hidden behind a head scarf, sunglasses and raincoat, get out of a car and run up the steps and across the plaza. Everyone praises the performance. She is a famous star. Who dares criticize her? Lee has to interrupt making

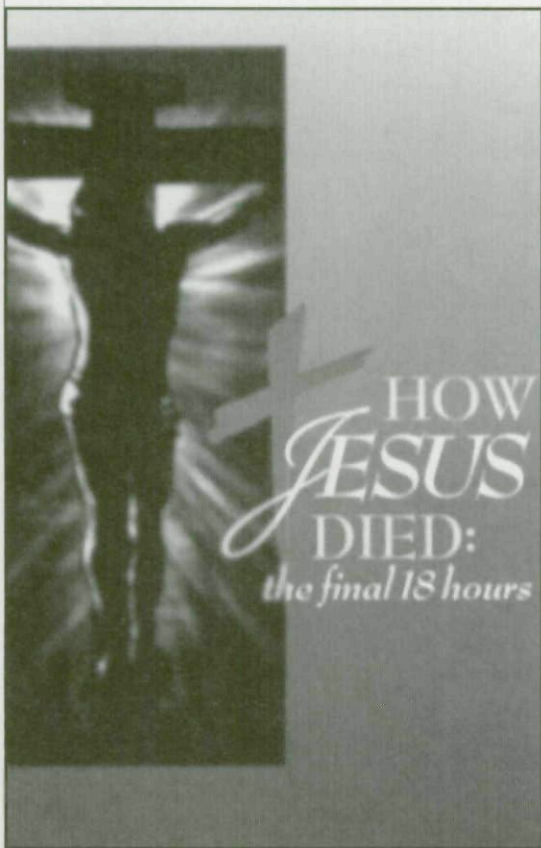
his pass at Nola, a technician-actress-waitress (Winona Ryder), to interview Nicole in her childhood home in what looks suspiciously like Brooklyn. He enthusiastically transfers his attention to his subject, and Nicole provides a creative response to his inquiries.

**T**HESE CELEBRITIES, Allen proposes, construct their own moral universe and live without fear of consequences. Brandon Darrow (Leonardo DiCaprio), a young movie-star thug high on cocaine, wrecks a hotel room and slaps around his girlfriend. Lee arrives to pitch a script idea to him, just as the police threaten to take Brandon to the station house. It's all a charade, however. Police, girlfriend and management alike choose not to prefer charges because, after all, Brandon is famous. Lee joins Brandon and his retinue for a trip to Atlantic City, but while the Famous People enjoy their rent-an-orgy dates with chemically assisted abandon, Lee listens to his assigned companion comparing her own writing to Chekhov.

Not only does he feel left out of all the carnal bliss that he believes celebrities enjoy; Lee must pay a terrible price for his own infidelities. His wife, Robin (Judy Davis), could swallow a Milltown factory and still make St. Vitus look comatose. Lee's asking her for a divorce is like parachuting into a live volcano without bothering to pull the ripcord. He has little luck with other women either. One of the sacrifices he must make for his work involves attending a fashion show to introduce a new line of lingerie. By a miracle of chance, he offers a ride to the gorgeous supermodel played by Cherlize Theron, but as she introduces him to her chic, famous friends in the fast lane, he realizes that he is driving an avocado-colored Edsel with a cracked cylinder head. Predictably, the evening plunges to the earth in flames, like the Hindenburg in a Jersey cornfield.

After her initial eruption, Lee's wife, Robin, blames herself and her Catholic inhibitions for her failed marriage. She goes off to a retreat house in the country to try to put the lava back into the crater, but she finds as much tranquility as she would if her Bloomingdale's charge card had been canceled without advance notice. While she struggles for peace of soul, a celebrity priest, who has his own television show and line of self-help books arrives and basks in the adulation of the inmates. For him, recognition

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provides the serenity that Robin struggles to draw from quiet reflection in a religious environment.

At the suggestion of a friend, Lee thinks she might find more peace through plastic surgery than prayer. During her visit to the cellulite chop shop she accidentally meets a television director, Tony Gardella (Joe Mantegna), who is instrumental in starting a series of improbable events that lead to celebrity, and with celebrity the happiness and fulfillment that she could never achieve through her own efforts at spiritual and cosmetic makeovers.

For his part, Lee finally settles down to complete his novel. Still unlucky in love, one more failed romance and its harrowing aftermath rob him of his rise to fame as a bright young author. He has done all that he could to achieve celebrity, but circumstances beyond his understanding and control continue to conspire against him. He remains a competent hack on the fringes of Manhattan's incestuous literary cliques.

**'C**ELEBRITY" ends where it began. The film with the epigraph "Help" has its premier, and Lee, still the obscure free-

lance magazine writer, covers the event to add a final touch of color to his profile of Nicole. He seems oddly at peace with his lot in life, as though he has finally accepted himself as a mere pawn of destiny. As the lights in the cavernous Ziegfeld theater dim, "Help," written in smoke, appears on the screen. The camera cuts to the audience sitting in the dark mindlessly plunging oily fingers into tubs of overpriced popcorn. Some are rich and famous, others merely the munching, unwashed, ticket-buying multitude. In the dark they are indistinguishable, unknown to anyone or anything but fate. Who knows why some are famous and some obscure, some happy and some miserable?

"Celebrity" recycles many of the old Woody Allen themes and characters, but in its own way it is quite innovative. Shot in a grainy, documentary black-and-white by Sven Nykvist, its newsprint appearance reproduces the look of the tabloids that trade promiscuously in the reputations and lives of the famous and near-famous. It deals with frankly sexual material, but Allen has an extraordinary ability to be bawdy without being salacious. The vocabulary might wilt the wimple of Sister Wendy; but as

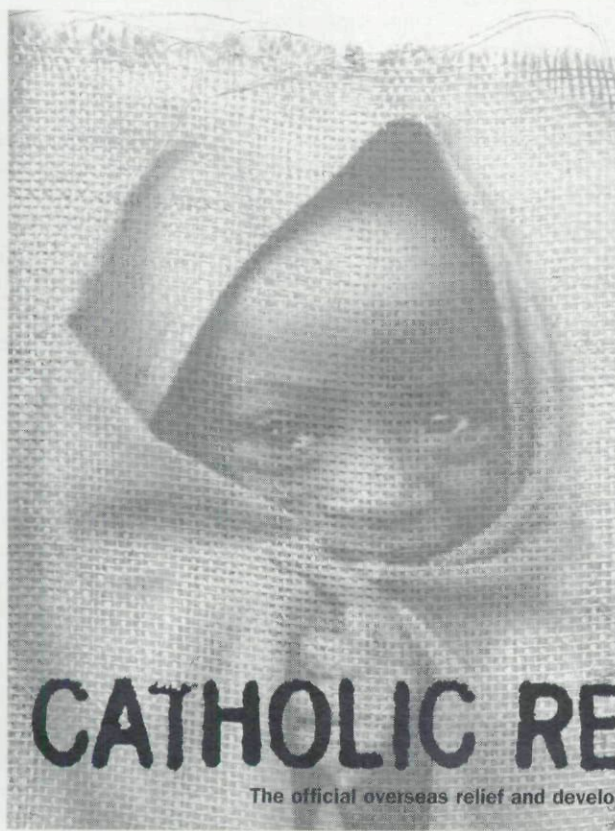
that little green man—or rather person, since there is no gender in Nebula Transhudsonia—has observed, Earthlings really do talk that way, especially when trying to cross the Triborough Bridge at rush hour.

**T**HE ENSEMBLE CAST is both brilliant and generous. Putting the neurotic Woody Allen persona into a robust, Irish actor makes the character's whining and fidgeting particularly obnoxious. Audiences could pity Allen because of his frail appearance, and to some extent could excuse his self-serving a-morality. Branagh makes him a tougher character whose moral myopia destroys those around him. Allen the director and writer is much harder on Branagh the actor than he could have been on Allen the actor. The change makes it a more powerful, if more disagreeable character.

"Jeez. What do you mean (cough) disagreeable? This is, you see, like on the blue planet. He's, you know, like what I said: lonely and sad."

"So are you, Earthling."

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