

# Allen farce mixes love with mild lust

By Chuck Jagoda

I found myself going to Woody Allen's latest film almost before I knew there was one. With a name like "A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy," it promised the charm of Shakespeare and the laughs of Woody Allen. I was surprised to find no waiting lines one night after its opening. (There were none on opening night either.) It seems Allen, never one to seek publicity, kept the prerelease publicity to a minimum. Not unexpected from one who forbade theater owners to use the Best Picture Oscar given to "Annie Hall" in 1977 in their advertising. But I must admit I did expect more laughs from Allen.

I found out I was expecting too much as soon as the credits rolled. When "Felix Mendelssohn" appeared under "Music by," I thought Allen was using one of the characters from "Side Effects," his most recent collection of comic prose. But NOOO! He meant the Felix Mendelssohn whose wedding march was an excellent choice for the background music of the film (as was the Gershwin music in "Manhattan").

The story is based on Shakespeare's multi-plot "Midsummer Night's Dream" and set in turn of the century upstate New York. Allen, a Wall Street stockbroker and crackpot inventor, is married to Mary Steenburgen. (Their sex life is somewhere between frigid and none.) Allen invites Jose Ferrer, a renowned professor who is as pompous as he is renowned, and his the virginally beautiful but sexually experienced fiancee, Mia Farrow, to a weekend vacation on the eve of their marriage. Also invited is Tony Roberts, a doctor in continual lust, and his equally lustful nurse/date, Julie Hagerty.

Under the influence of the long summer day, Allen's magical inventions (an updating of Puck), the lusts of the characters and the impending end of sexual freedom for Ferrer and Farrow, all the men fall in love (lust?) with Farrow, Hagerty falls for Ferrer, and Farrow finally gives in to Allen. The complications and permutations aren't as involved as in Shakespeare, but the elements of magic, romance and overpowering desire are well represented — especially the romance.

The lighting and cinematography are excellent. The twilight lasted forever and bathed the performers and scenery in a golden glow. Most of the latter scenes must have been painstakingly shot in those few moments of "natural twilight available" with each of many sunsets.

The actors play well together. They are very believable and sympathetic. Ferrer's recitation of some of the more poetic lines conveyed a nice touch of the poetic. Roberts did some of this as well. Hagerty's lust was lovely — earthy, yet not dirty.

Steenburgen deserves special mention for creating yet another personable, charming character — someone you really want to get to know. She seems never to be acting — only behaving. And she does this in spite of such a distinctive voice you expect to be able to recognize her as the same character in each part. She does such a good job of involving us in her struggle to overcome frigidity (by means of a detailed instructional lecture on sexual technique from the experienced Hagerty) that we barely notice that the lecture turns into a Freudian analysis of the causes of the frigid condition.

How come we don't notice, you ask? Can't an artist of Allen's comic ability point a joke and make us laugh if he wants to? Of course he can. The king of cute comedy has achieved a higher laugh-per-frame count in farces like "Bananas" and "Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid to Ask." But in this — and indeed in all his later comedies — Allen seems to be exploring the subtler realms of the comic form. In this film he finds the positive, romantic, beautiful aspects of human love and shows them to us. If you like romance and gentle lust in a good plot — Allen's tightest comic plot to date — and don't mind doing without some of the belly laughs of a broad farce, this is the summer comedy for you.



Staff Photo by David Wood

Elvis Costello croones a ballad to a full house in Omaha. The Aug. 3 appearance was organized by Schon Productions, who will bring the Police and the English Beat to Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha Aug. 24. A third band, either Joan Jett or some larger act, also will perform.

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