



Broadway Danny Rose

Director: Woody Allen
Country: USA
Date: 1984

A review by Andrew Pulver for The Guardian:

Only one film poster has stayed with me throughout my entire time as a film journalist, surviving multiple moves and flatshares; it must say something that the six-foot-one-sheet of a Broadway Danny Rose has outlasted all-comers, the likes of *The Cable Guy*, *Violent Cop* and Tenghiz Abuladze's *Repentance*. I bought it in the mid-80s, a callow twenty-something on a trip Paris, at one of those stalls by the Seine, and had to fold it up to get it home. I honestly don't think a day has gone by without my reading aloud one or other of the sonorous critics' quotes printed in French down one side, next to the small picture of Woody Allen bound together with Mia Farrow. I'm not entirely sure what every word means, but they all sound so great. One day I might agree with André Laffargue of *Le Parisien* that there are "tant de gags, tant de notassions cocasses, et tant de fines observations". Another day I'll fall in with Jean Rocheteau of *La Croix*, who says that BDR is "un film qui nous a rendus heureux par sa drôlerie, son humour, par sa sensibilité à fleur de peau". Or occasionally life calls for a dose of L'Humanité's Gilles Le Morvan: "On jubile."



"On jubile" is right. I think we know what they're going on about. When Broadway Danny Rose came out in 1984 Allen was, in hindsight, right in the middle of that amazing run: the one that started, approximately, in 1979 with *Manhattan* (with its successful fusion of Allen's trademark ripsnorting gag-making, and the more stately, structured drama he clearly yearned to produce) and ended, sort of, in 1992, with *Husbands and Wives* (the last film he completed before what I call *The Trouble* – his career-disorientating breakup with Mia Farrow). This golden period is the bedrock of the Allen ritual: every year, along came another wonderful film, and every year, I'd make sure I was in the cinema to watch it. Some of them (the later ones) I saw at press screenings, most of them I forked out my own hard-earned money, a few I even saw in New York or Paris; but I never failed. It was semi-religious in nature; equivalent to my yearly appearance at synagogue for Yom Kippur. And it was a lot more entertaining.

Allen made several other unquestionably wonderful films in this fantastic roll, any and each of which I could have picked. *Stardust Memories*, *Zelig*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *A Midsummer's Night Sex Comedy* – as well as the one that most nearly matches up to BDR in its sublime mix of nostalgia, giggles and sheer tenderness: *Radio Days*. But Broadway Danny Rose gets the palm, I think, because of its commitment to humanity, and to love, and to righteousness.

Let me explain. It may seem odd to find these large virtues in what, in the end, is a black-and-white film about a two-bit variety agent, but they are embedded into its very fabric. BDR is basically about loyalty, and how as a species we want it to be rewarded. Rose is the guy who collects terrible performers like other people collect tropical fish: the one-legged tap dancer, the blind juggler, the lousy balloon-folders – they're his children, and he looks after them like an anxious hen. Lou Canova, the cheesy, chunky lounge-bar singer, is the cuckoo in the nest – or, more accurately, the cuckoo is his on-off extra-marital dalliance: a restless mafia wife called Tina. Tina turns Lou's head with promises of major backup, and because she really can call in one or two unrefusable favours, Lou gets a bite from a major player, Sid Bacharach (Burt's fictional older brother?) – and in a heartbreaking scene, dumps Rose on the very night of the latter's greatest triumph, getting his protege on the Milton Berle show.

But this act of hideous, brazen ingratitude doesn't help Lou and Tina in the long run: the moral outrage she is responsible for appears to infiltrate Tina's conscience, and her restlessness results in her seeking forgiveness from the man of unswerving faith: Danny Rose, with his frozen Thanksgiving dinners and useless comedians, and hopeless singing-glass manipulators. I always thought of BDR as Allen's one great irreproachable romance, but having watched it again, I see the finale is much more inconclusive than I first assumed: Danny and Tina don't kiss, or even embrace, after the former's dash through the streets; he merely takes her arm, and they walk back together. It makes no difference, though: this story is not about consummation, but about reconciliation; it's a recognition that we want wrongs to be righted, that good will prevail, and that the faithless will be punished or reformed.



All this may sound a little heavy: it's Allen's genius to encase this epic moral hero in the body of a total loser, a guy who is "strictly pavement", a consummate schmooze-artist starts heaving the moment he steps on board a boat. For even in Allen's exceptional gallery of schlemiels, nebbishes and putzes, Rose stands out as something special: no book smarts, zero sexual presence, appalling dress sense. He's a long way away from the nerdy smartmouth persona that Allen patented in his "early, funny" movies. But Allen's affection for his character is palpable, as is his affection for the

theatreland sub-culture that Rose represents. It's hard to tell exactly when BDR is supposed to be set – probably in the late 70s, judging by the fatness of Rose's shirt collars and the circumference of Tina's globular sunglasses – but the black and white gives it an air of an earlier era, a rickety reminder of the Great White Way's glory days in the Sweet Smell of Success 1950s, and perhaps reaching back even further to the Damon Runyon 1930s.

Presumably disinterring memories of his own time as hustling gag-writer in the 1960s, Allen's depiction of this world has the urgency of pure honesty. (I particularly love the squabble over whether one act should get paid even if his "lead bird" is dead – "The cat ate his bird. That comes under the Act of God clause.") One marker as to its accuracy is the subsequent career of BDR's crooner-in-chief, Nick Apollo Forte, he never made another film, and his website shows he's basically had the same career as his character. (It helps you imagine what might have happened to Danny and Tina; I doubt they'd have stayed together very long, and Danny would probably have died of a heart attack in a flophouse a few years later – just like Saul Bellow's Von Humboldt Fleisher.)

It's ultimately impossible to fully understand Broadway Danny Rose without coming to grips with its innate Jewishness. I remember emerging from the cinema back in 1984 suffused with an odd sense of ethnic pride: what other culture would see the heroism in such an apparently inconsequential failure of a human being? Danny Rose is useless in a fight, can barely run up a hill without being sick, is a loser in business, is deserted by all except those even more troubled than him. But he is unquestionably a beacon of hope in a moral wasteland – because of, not despite, his refusal to take other people on. Rose's Jewishness is a defiantly non-religious identity; something that modern commentators on religion and identity just can't seem to get their head round, but in Allen's generation (and my own parents') was entirely the norm. We need to bring it back. I think every ethnic group could learn something.

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