



Midnight in Paris

Director: Woody Allen
Country: USA
Date: 2011

A review by Chris Tookey of *The Daily Mail*:

Just when Woody Allen seemed to have written and directed himself out, he comes up with his biggest hit. *Midnight In Paris* arrives here as his highest-grossing movie, surpassing even *Hannah And Her Sisters*, *Manhattan* and *Annie Hall* - and it's one of his best.

The blond, laid-back, very un-Jewish Owen Wilson may seem like a daft choice to play Allen's latest angst-ridden alter ego, but he turns out to be ideal. His unpretentious charm takes the curse off the 75-year-old Allen's increasingly crotchety approach to characters he dislikes - which include pedants, academics and anyone politically to the right of centre.

Wilson plays Gil, a Hollywood hack screenwriter with dreams of being a great novelist. He's revising the first draft of a book while visiting Paris with his practical-minded fiancée Inez (Rachel McAdams) and her stuffy, Francophobe parents (Kurt Fuller and Mimi Kennedy). As if they are not bad enough company, Gil runs into Inez's old friend Paul (Michael Sheen), an insufferable know-it-all who prefaces every statement with the mock-humble 'if I'm not mistaken', and spends his time either contradicting the guide at the Rodin museum (Carla Bruni, adequate in an undemanding role) or trying to make Gil feel inferior.

Gil's holiday is hugely improved when, on the stroke of midnight over a number of nights, he is miraculously transported back to Paris in the Twenties, where he meets a who's who of cultural heroes, starting with F. Scott Fitzgerald (Tom Hiddleston), Ernest Hemingway (Corey Stoll) and Gertrude Stein (Kathy Bates). Allen has a lot of fun with them, especially Hemingway, whom he makes an endearing mixture of artistic integrity and posturing machismo. Hemingway probes Gil for evidence of masculinity with the query: 'Have you ever hunted?' Gil parries this away with the quintessentially Woody one-liner: 'Only for bargains.'

Gil also falls in love with the gorgeous Adriana (Marion Cotillard, so who wouldn't?). She's a high-class groupie, formerly involved with Braque and Modigliani, and currently shacked up with temperamental, up-and-coming artist Pablo Picasso (Marcial Di Fonzo Bo). She, of course, loathes the mediocrity of Paris in the Twenties and much prefers the Belle Epoque of the 1890s, when the arts scene was livelier, and you could have run into truly talented people like Gauguin, Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec.

Cynics might suggest that the reason *Midnight In Paris* is turning out to be Allen's biggest hit is that it offers a superficial view of Paris, a name-dropping view of artists, and an ambivalent view of nostalgia. The argument of the film is that you shouldn't live in the past; the underlying, and surely contradictory, message is that the past is infinitely more alluring than the present. And yet so harsh an analysis is to underestimate the film's attractions.

The opening shots (reminiscent of Allen's 1979 masterpiece, *Manhattan*) are at first sight a compendium of clichés — Notre Dame, the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower all put in appearances. No attempt is made to show the less attractive sides of Paris. But even in these opening shots, cinematographer Darius Khondji craftily prepares us with a sprinkling of rain and the coming of night for a return to the kind of magic

realism Woody Allen explored cinematically in *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, and in short stories such as *The Kugelmass Episode*, where *Madame Bovary* visited present-day Manhattan.

Wisely, Allen does not waste time trying to explain time travel. He realises the audience doesn't care. We know the story isn't real, but go along with it because it's such a beguiling fantasy. Allen has made funnier films and a few deeper ones (here I'm thinking especially of *Crimes And Misdemeanors*), but he has never made one that glides by with such ease and confidence. While you are watching it, it has the lightness of a soufflé. It's only in retrospect that its more satisfying qualities emerge.

It's easy to see that it has a magic about it, a warmth and charm and - above all - a yearning for romance, and values beyond the mercenary. Less obviously, it shows a understanding of the value of criticism and self-criticism. Gil is uncertain whom to show his novel to for a sympathetic but honest critique. We see early on why he doesn't offer it to his fiancée, for she is uninterested in his talent except as a way of making money, and would be happiest if he stuck to hackwork.

On meeting Hemingway, Gil wonders if the great writer would criticise his novel, but Hemingway refuses, saying that if it's bad he'll be merciless because he's a rival, and if it's good he'll be vindictive because he's envious. The ideal critic, Gil finds, is Gertrude Stein, portrayed here as a selfless, motherly soul and a fount of human and artistic sympathy. She does, indeed, lend Gil her support and gives him an insight - not hers, ironically, but Hemingway's - that fundamentally alters Gil's perspective on his novel and his life.

The real message of the movie is not the one that it seems to be labouring -that nostalgia is a trap - but that life and art are both worth the most meticulous re-examination and a life without art or romance is one that's only half-lived. Moreover, Allen argues - in an entrancing final scene - lasting relationships are built not on lust or love at first sight, but on understanding based on shared tastes. That's a point rarely made in romantic comedies, and has much to recommend it.

Midnight In Paris is not only one of Woody Allen's most enjoyable films - it's also one of his wisest.

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