

Wise Cracks: The Comedies Of **WOODY ALLEN** at BFI Southbank



BFI Southbank launches the New Year with an offering of thrills and laughter from **Woody Allen**, a most prolific filmmaker whose career has spanned just over six decades and more than 40 feature films, with a new film made almost every year. A celebration of his classic comedies will screen throughout January, including **Extended Runs** of both **Zelig** (1983) and the multi-**Oscar**-winning **Hannah and Her Sisters** (1986). This retrospective of films presents a timely reminder of his brilliant and exceptional career as a writer-director of comedy films, plus the importance of the comedy genre, as BFI Southbank presents the first London Comedy Film Festival at the end of the month.

Allen's career began by writing jokes for a local newspaper before progressing to stand-up comedy, then to writing gags and scripts for television and eventually screenwriting and appearing in films, until it was clear, to him, that he needed to direct films himself. This BFI season starts with **Bananas** (1971) and the sci-fi **Sleeper** (1973), where Allen's trademark characteristics of a nervous, somewhat pessimistic New York Jew, with a sharp and self-deprecating banter were first established. *Sleeper* was the first partnering of Allen and **Diane Keaton**, who would go on to star in the period piece **Love and Death** (1975) and the Allen classics **Annie Hall** (1977), for which he won **Academy Awards** for **Best Director** and **Best Original Screenplay**, and **Manhattan** (1979) – the latter an unforgettable tribute to New York.

Love, and the fathoming of, is a key theme that spans his films, and Allen's personal relationships would both inform and inspire his work. By the early 1980s he had met **Mia Farrow** and a new on-screen partnership was launched with **A Midsummer Nights Sex Comedy** (1982), **Broadway Danny Rose** (1984) and the Depression-era cinema fantasy **The**

Purple Rose of Cairo (1985), before *Hannah and Her Sisters*, which earned him another Oscar for Best Original Screenplay along with a nomination for Best Film.

With the onset of 1990s, and his 'middle-period', Allen performed less in front of the camera, as with titles such as **Bullets Over Broadway** (1994), where **John Cusack** takes the lead, and **Celebrity** (1998), starring **Kenneth Brannagh** and **Leonardo DiCaprio**. More recent titles have received mixed reviews, but **Vicky Cristina Barcelona** (2008) brought a return to form and his most recent offering, **Midnight in Paris** (2011), his been biggest box office success yet. The selection of films offered this month is a great reminder of the amazing ability that Allen has to find humour in some of the most unusual of circumstances. His next feature is in post-production and provides proof that he still has much to amuse audiences with.

Media Partner:



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PROGRAMME INFORMATION:

Bananas

USA 1971. With Louise Lasser, Carlos Montalban, Jacobo Morales. 78min. 15

A wonderfully funny ragbag of gloriously absurd gags chronicling a puny, largely petrified New York Jew's chaotic involvement with Latin American revolutionaries hoping to topple a dictator. The reason for Woody's impulsive altruism? To impress political activist Louise Lasser (Allen's second wife), of course. Though the direction is solid rather than flamboyant, the film's energy and invention more than compensate. Look out for Sylvester Stallone.

Sun 1 Jan 16:00 NFT3, Sun 8 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Sleeper

USA 1973. With Diane Keaton, John Beck. 87min. PG

In his engagingly irreverent take on the sci-fi genre, Woody's Greenwich Village jazz clarinetist does a Rip Van Winkle through cryogenics and wakes up in a largely sex-free 2174, where rebels enlist his predictably reluctant help in their struggle against the totalitarian authorities. By now Diane Keaton had taken over as romantic interest, and she was to prove the perfect comic foil to the writer director's on-screen persona.

Sun 1 Jan 18:20 NFT3, Sat 7 Jan 20:50 NFT2, Wed 18 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Love and Death

USA 1975. With Diane Keaton, Olga Georges-Picot, Harold Gould. 81min. PG

Arguably the most coherent and consistently funny of all Allen's unrepentantly comic, pre-*Annie Hall* films, this remarkably astute parody of Russian literature in all its lugubriously epic splendour finds his customarily Jewish little-man courting his beloved Keaton amid the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars. Eisensteinian montage and philosophical discussions cover a range of topics: love, death, God, war, honour, string, herrings, and wheat... so much wheat.

Sun 1 Jan 20:30 NFT3, Sat 7 Jan 16:00 NFT2, Thu 12 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Annie Hall

USA 1977. With Diane Keaton, Tony Roberts, Paul Simon, Carol Kane. 93min. 15

Greeted as a step forward in that the narrative – no longer a string of gags – gained in psychological coherence, this was also the first of Allen's films regarded as rooted to some degree in autobiography (he plays a neurotic New York comic who falls for a ditzy singer) – though in hindsight the film, for all its humour and romance, feels a little hesitant in places compared to the bold 80s masterworks. Besides Keaton's wonderful performance, look out for future stars in minor roles.

Mon 2 Jan 16:15 NFT1, Fri 6 Jan 18:30 NFT1, Fri 13 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Sat 14 Jan 18:30 NFT1

Manhattan

USA 1979. With Diane Keaton, Michael Murphy, Mariel Hemingway, Meryl Streep. 96min. 12A

With this film, Allen first achieved a fully rewarding balance of comedy and drama, enhancing the tale of a television comedy-writer's vacillating relationships with the various women in his life by framing it as a love letter to New York. The unforgettable opening montage, cut to Gershwin, clearly signposts his ambitions both as a filmmaker and as a devout celebrant of the city.

Mon 2 Jan 18:30 NFT1, Fri 6 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Tue 10 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Sun 22 Jan 20:45 NFT1

A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy

USA 1982. With Mia Farrow, José Ferrer, Julie Hagerty, Tony Roberts, Mary Steenburgen. 88min. 15

The title may allude to Shakespeare and Bergman, but this warm period comedy, charting the romantically complicated encounter of three couples at a house in the country, seems as indebted to Renoir as it is to the Swede. The first of his films with Mia Farrow, it feels suffused with the enchantment of falling in love, and is perhaps his only film to profess some sort of real belief in the power of magic

Mon 2 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Sun 8 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Broadway Danny Rose

USA 1984. With Mia Farrow, Nick Apollo Forte, Sandy Baron. 84min. PG

This delightfully anecdotal tale of a lowly but conscientious theatrical agent (Allen), who acts as a beard for an adulterous crooner and finds himself pursued by the mobster family of the brassy mistress (Farrow at her very best), is distinguished by its warm, affectionate tone. Gordon Willis's black-and-white camera work lends the troubled fairytale romance the feel of reality, while the expert sparring between the two leads is both funny and touching.

Tue 3 Jan 20:40 NFT2, Sat 7 Jan 18:40 NFT3, Mon 9 Jan 18:20 NFT2

The Purple Rose of Cairo

USA 1985. With Mia Farrow, Jeff Daniels, Danny Aiello. 82min. PG

An utterly charming variation on the conceit pioneered by Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr*, this finds a downtrodden Depression-era housewife (Farrow) attracting the attention of the leading man (Daniels) in the ludicrously exotic romance she keeps watching; the escapism escalates when he abandons the movie to visit her reality – a bewildering crossover for all concerned. Fantasy it may be, but in its emotional dynamics the film is authentic enough to be genuinely affecting.

Mon 9 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Sat 21 Jan 18:40 NFT2

Crimes and Misdemeanors

USA 1989. With Mia Farrow, Alan Alda, Claire Bloom, Sam Waterston. 104min. 15

One of Allen's darkest comedies, this has two loosely linked stories – one about a documentarist (Allen) falling for the producer (Farrow) of a TV tribute to his despicably successful brother-in-law, the other about a married ophthalmologist (Martin Landau) deciding to rid himself of a clinging lover (Anjelica Huston) – which share a concern with guilt, troubled faith and the injustices of life. Ambitious, complex and beautifully acted by all involved.

Fri 13 Jan 18:30 NFT1, Sun 15 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Sun 22 Jan 15:50 NFT3

Husbands and Wives

USA 1992. With Mia Farrow, Liam Neeson, Juliette Lewis, Blythe Danner. 108min. 15

An astute examination of the ethics of love and marriage, this sees a seemingly happily married couple (Allen and Farrow) reassessing their own relationship when their close friends (Judy Davis and Sydney Pollack) announce an amicable separation. Shot in a hand-held documentary style and

boasting terrific performances, this is one of Allen's most emotionally honest and psychologically incisive achievements.

Tue 10 Jan 18:30 NFT1, Sat 14 Jan 20:45 NFT1, Sun 22 Jan 18:10 NFT3

Manhattan Murder Mystery

USA 1993. With Diane Keaton, Anjelica Huston, Alan Alda. 107min. PG

In part a tribute to the cowardly bluster that was Bob Hope's speciality, this is one of the most unapologetically escapist of Allen's middle-period comedies, in which Allen's panicky protagonist worries about the keen interest taken by his wife (Keaton) both in one of his friends and in the death of a neighbour. A bright and pacy blend of suspense and gags, executed with considerable gusto.

Thu 12 Jan 20:40 NFT2, Mon 16 Jan 18:20 NFT2, Tue 17 Jan 20:30 NFT2

Bullets Over Broadway

USA 1994. With John Cusack, Dianne Wiest, Jim Broadbent, Rob Reiner, Mary Louise Parker. 99min. PG

John Cusack plays a faintly Allenesque young playwright, dealing not only with temperamental stars (Wiest in fine fettle) but with a bodyguard (Chazz Palminteri) assigned by his gangster backer to keep an eye on the flapper girlfriend (Jennifer Tilly) he insists has a role. The jazz-age setting allows Allen some leeway in terms of authenticity, but that doesn't mean his reflections on the relationship between life and the theatre don't have bite.

Sat 14 Jan 16:15 NFT1, Wed 18 Jan 20:45 NFT2, Sat 21 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Everyone Says I Love You

USA 1996. With Goldie Hawn, Natalie Portman, Drew Barrymore, Billy Crudup. 100min. 12A

Arguably Allen's most unlikely film – a musical packed with romantic standards, set in New York, Venice and Paris, and chronicling the complex romantic lives of a large family from Manhattan – and perhaps, too, his most improbable cast, ranging from Julia Roberts to Tim Roth, Goldie Hawn to Edward Norton. But it works: the energy and enthusiasm of the cast easily make up for any shortcomings in their singing and dancing, and the whole has a delicate charm.

Sun 15 Jan 18:30 NFT1, Fri 20 Jan 18:20 NFT3

Deconstructing Harry

USA 1997. With Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, Judy Davis, Kirstie Alley. 96min

Though clearly inspired by Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, this tale of a blocked, philandering, foul-mouthed writer (Allen) driving – along with his best friend, his nine-year-old son and a (black!) hooker – to receive an award at his *alma mater* is very funny, and one of Allen's most inventive films as it compares and contrasts the realities of the author's life with their fictionalised versions. Of the remarkable cast, it is Robin Williams who is perhaps most amusing as an actor literally having trouble with his focus.

Wed 11 Jan 18:15 NFT1, Sat 28 Jan 18:10 NFT3

Celebrity

USA 1998. With Kenneth Branagh, Judy Davis, Joe Mantegna, Melanie Griffith, Winona Ryder. 113min

Scumbag journalist Lee (Branagh sporting Allen-ish traits) and Robin (Davis) have just divorced, but their paths keep crossing at the endless parties, receptions and previews frequented by New York's smart set. A jaundiced, often very amusing caricature of the contemporary obsession with fame, enhanced by some fine performances: Leonardo DiCaprio's spoilt movie star and Charlize Theron's supermodel are stand-outs.

Wed 25 Jan 20:30 NFT2, Sun 29 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Sweet and Lowdown

USA 1999. With Sean Penn, Samantha Morton, Uma Thurman, Anthony LaPaglia, John Waters. 95min. PG

An arrogant, self-centred, hard-living 30s jazz guitarist (Penn) reluctantly gets involved with a gentle, generous mute (Morton) and can't be bothered ever to end the affair properly. A strangely tender, touching tale of pride, prejudice, self-obsession and redemption, the film impresses for its strong sense of period and place and its excellent performances; Allen himself appears as one of the jazz fans reflecting on the couple's story in documentary style 'interview' sequences.

Wed 25 Jan 18:20 NFT2, Sun 29 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Melinda and Melinda

USA 2004. With Radha Mitchell, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Wallace Shawn, Josh Brolin. 99min. 12A

Is life essentially tragic or comic? Writers in a restaurant debate this question by developing two versions – one supposedly serious, the other meant to be funny – of a story about the effects of a woman (Mitchell) turning up unexpectedly at a dinner party given by friends (Chloe Sevigny and Jonny Lee Miller in the first, Will Ferrell and Amanda Peet in the second). An ingenious reflection on life and art, and very relevant to Allen's own work.

Thu 26 Jan 18:10 NFT2, Mon 30 Jan 20:45 NFT2

Match Point

UK 2005. With Scarlett Johansson, Brian Cox, Penelope Wilton, Ewen Bremner. 124min. 12A

In many respects a London-set reworking of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Allen's first British film pitches an upwardly mobile tennis player (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) among a wealthy family; after taking up with the daughter who adores him (Emily Mortimer), he falls for her brother's actress fiancée (Johansson)... If the depiction of British society is hardly Loachian in its thrust, that's not the point; it is Allen's interest in ethical dilemmas that lends the film's dramatic elements some depth.

Thu 26 Jan 20:30 NFT2, Mon 30 Jan 18:20 NFT2

Vicky Cristina Barcelona

Spain 2008. With Scarlett Johansson, Rebecca Hall, Javier Bardem, Penelope Cruz, Patricia Clarkson. 96min. 12A

While spending the summer in Barcelona, two friends (Hall and Johansson) meet a painter (Bardem) and react very differently to his seductive charms; the situation is further complicated by the reappearance of his estranged and very volatile wife (Cruz). While Allen's Spanish film certainly deals in cultural and gender stereotypes, a welcome hint of absurdism – most notable in the delicious performances of Bardem and Cruz – enhances the sunny mood.

Fri 27 Jan 18:10 NFT2, Tue 31 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Midnight in Paris

France 2011 With Owen Wilson, Rachel McAdams, Michael Sheen, Adrian Brody, Kathy Bates 94min Digital 12A

A blocked Hollywood writer (Wilson), visiting Paris, finds that immersing himself – with a vengeance – in the city's literary past revitalises him; trouble is, it also causes problems with his fiancée (McAdams). The appeal of visiting the golden age is not exclusively due to an attractive woman (Marion Cotillard), given that the Fitzgeralds, Dali, Buñuel (who gives rise to a wonderful gag) and Gertrude Stein are also around. But, Allen asks, should we really prefer the past? What about the present?

Fri 27 Jan 20:50 Studio; Sat 28 Jan 16:20, 20:50 Studio; Sun 29 Jan 16:20, 20:50 Studio; Mon 30 Jan 21:00 NFT1; Tue 31 Jan 18:20 NFT2, 20:50 Studio; (continues in February)

Extended Runs: Fri 30 Dec – Thu 19 Jan

Zelig

In part, a comic reworking of the themes of *Citizen Kane*, Allen's meticulous mockumentary about a long-forgotten 'human chameleon' may now be celebrated as a masterwork years ahead of its time. Complete with unseen narrator, archive footage and on-screen comments from Susan Sontag, Saul Bellow et al, the film deals with the life and times of Leonard Zelig (Allen), an otherwise unremarkable man who, in the 1920s, became a figure of fame and controversy due to his tendency to take on the characteristics and appearance of whoever he was with at the time. Allen turns this simple but ingenious idea into a multilayered – and very funny – meditation on issues of (individual, national and ethnic) identity, celebrity culture and our need to connect. Expertly manipulating newsreel footage (long before digital technology) so that Zelig is seen hobnobbing with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, the Pope and even – irony of ironies! – Hitler), Allen paints a richly resonant portrait of a changing world, while finding space for a touching tribute to Mia Farrow (playing Zelig's loyal analyst). Endlessly rewarding.

USA 1983 Dir Woody Allen. With Woody Allen, Mia Farrow, Garrett Brown, Mary Louise Wilson 79min PG. Courtesy of Park Circus

(Thu 12 Jan 18:40 NFT3 introduced by Geoff Andrew)

Hannah and Her Sisters

Perhaps the warmest and, dramatically, most refined of all Allen's ensemble dramas, this look at a year in the life of an extended well-to-do Manhattan family sees him at the peak of his powers – as writer, director and performer. Next to sisters Lee (Hershey), who lives with a misanthropic painter, and Holly (Wiest), a neurotic lost in vague dreams of career success, Hannah (Farrow) seems a model of strength and stability; she's even remained on good terms with her hypochondriac ex (Allen). What nobody, Hannah included, knows is that her current husband (Caine) has fallen for Lee...

As Allen traces the many delicate threads of his densely textured narrative, it's soon clear both that we're in Chekhov territory – the transience of life, the irresistibility of desire, the need to keep things in perspective – and that the perspective here is distinctly and gloriously Allen's. The performances of the remarkable cast are uniformly superb, Carlo di Ponti's images render Manhattan magical, and the whole is immensely satisfying.

USA 1986. Dir Woody Allen. With Mia Farrow, Barbara Hershey, Dianne Wiest, Michael Caine, Carrie Fisher, Max Von Sydow, Maureen O'Sullivan, Lloyd Nolan. 107min 15 Courtesy of Park Circus

About the BFI

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- Connecting audiences to the widest choice of British and World cinema
- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

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