

THE EARLY, FUNNY ONES

If you weren't around back then, you cannot possibly imagine how brilliantly funny Woody Allen's early, funny ones actually were. Allen had been a successful writer and stand-up comic for years. His jokes were unique, as was his delivery and persona. He'd already gotten his feet wet in film with his screenplay for *What's New, Pussycat?* (in which he also appeared with early persona fully-formed), and with *What's Up, Tiger Lily*, where he took a Japanese action film and dubbed in his own hilarious dialogue. But seeing his first real Woody Allen film, *Take The Money and Run*, and then, subsequently, *Bananas* and *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*, you knew you were watching an emerging comic genius. I differentiate those three from his next two, *Sleeper* and *Love and Death*, because with those his filmmaking became more assured, and by the time of *Annie Hall*, his filmmaking talent was in full bloom. In those first three films you can see Allen learning about cinema – where to put the camera to best capture his physical gags, trying to figure out a style, experimenting – but while all of that is happening he's delivering one huge belly-laugh after another.

For those who first saw these films in later decades – on TV or on video – it's just not the same as it was sitting in a theater during the initial runs with a full house roaring with laughter literally every couple of minutes. Sometimes the laughs came so fast that you couldn't catch your breath. And this was before his jokes and films had been "borrowed" from hundreds of times by filmmakers who came nowhere near his uniqueness. Back then, each new Woody Allen film was an event.

Bananas was released two years after *Take The Money and Run*. Like that film, *Bananas* had a plot, but was more a string of gags laid on top of the plot. By this time, Allen was even more accomplished as an actor – he'd starred on Broadway in his hit play, *Play It Again, Sam*, and in addition to his great comic timing with his dialogue, he was also becoming an adept physical comedian. So, in *Bananas* you not only get great and funny dialogue scenes, but also some classic slapstick physical comedy scenes, like Allen's demonstration of the Execusizer. There are lots of satirical jabs directed at lots of targets, a little romance (with Louise Lasser), and two funny appearances by sportscaster Howard Cosell. My two personal favorite bits from the film: The scene where Allen tries to sneakily buy a copy of a magazine called *Orgasm* by putting it in between other magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*, only to have the proprietor say loudly, "Hey, Ralph, how much is a copy of *Orgasm*?" It goes on from there and Allen's reactions are priceless. The other bit is just a non-sequitur line of dialogue that is so off-the-wall that the first time I heard it I laughed uncontrollably in the theater for about five minutes (no one else was laughing at that particular line). Woody asks Louise Lasser if she's hungry and then says, "I could open a can of ribs." *A can of ribs*. I don't know

– that just made me laugh uncontrollably again as I wrote it down here. Go know. But that's the thing – everyone has their favorite lines and bits from a Woody Allen film, and, if asked, can probably quote them to you verbatim instantly.

Marvin Hamlisch, who provided the score to *Bananas*, had already worked with Allen on *Take The Money and Run*. Hamlisch had gone to Juilliard, been a rehearsal pianist for the Broadway show *Funny Girl*, and had written a hit song by the time he was twenty-one – Leslie Gore's "Sunshine, Lollipops, and Rainbows." Only three of Allen's early films had original scores – *Take The Money and Run*, *Bananas*, and *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask* – even though Woody is credited with music on *Sleeper*, it's actually all instrumentals of vintage songs played by him and his cohorts. It wasn't until 2007 that a Woody Allen film would once again have an original score – Philip Glass' *Cassandra's Dream* – otherwise he used existing music or arrangements of existing music. Hamlisch really does a masterful job of helping the pace of *Bananas* and keeping its tone consistent.

Considering it was only his third full score (after *Run* and *The Swimmer*), it's a terrific piece of work. Right from the get-go, Hamlisch gets it perfect with his main title music, which includes the song "Quiero La Noche" (for which he wrote his own Spanish lyrics). And then the rest of the film is just chockfull of catchy tunes, including his beautiful love theme for Allen and Lasser. Hamlisch's greatest successes were waiting just around the corner – just two years later he would win three Academy Awards – one for his adaptation of Scott Joplin music for *The Sting*, and two for *The Way We Were* (Best Score and Best Song). Right after that he began work on what would become one of the longest-running musicals of all-time – *A Chorus Line*. He would go on to write such scores as *The Spy Who Loved Me*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Chapter Two*, *Ice Castles* and many others, as well as the hit Broadway musical, *They're Playing Our Song*. Hamlisch has won the Oscar, the Emmy, the Grammy, and the Tony.

Allen followed *Bananas* with *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask* (hereinafter called *Sex* because who needs to type that much), from the best-selling book of that title by Dr. David Reuben. Well, not really from the book – Allen simply took its title and some of the chapter headings from the book, then did a series of sketches on chapter titles such as "Do Aphrodisiacs Work" "What Is Sodomy" "What Happens During Ejaculation," and having his own comic way with each. Some of the sketches are amongst Allen's best – the opening segment, "Do Aphrodisiacs Work" has Allen as a court fool telling awful jokes and trying to get into the Queen's chastity belt after giving her a strong love potion. The wordplay in this segment is incredible, whether sending up Shakespeare ("TB or not TB, that is the congestion") or just doing a great one-liner ("Before you know it the Renaissance will be here and we'll all be painting"); it's a home run right out of the gate. There's a wonderful Antonioni par-

ody (style-wise, and all in Italian with subtitles), a game-show parody, "What's Your Perversion?" a segment with a giant breast running amok, and the final segment, wherein Allen plays a reluctant sperm. Like all sketch films, some play brilliantly, some less so, but overall it's much more hit than not. The supporting players are terrific – Lynn Redgrave, Anthony Quayle, Gene Wilder (in love with a sheep named Daisy), John Carradine (in full mad scientist mode), Heather MacRae, Tony Randall, Burt Reynolds, Louise Lasser, and Lou Jacobi. The film was a huge hit and further established Allen as both a comedian and a comic filmmaker to be reckoned with.

The score to *Sex* was written by Mundell Lowe, a jazzman and a fantastic guitar player who worked with such legends as Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, and many others. He didn't do a whole lot of scoring in films and TV, but he was and is an excellent composer. His films include *Satan In High Heels*, Tom Laughlin's *Billy Jack*, TV shows like *The Wild, Wild West*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and several TV movies.

While not all of the score he wrote for *Sex* made it into the film, his music is really outstanding, from the jazzy baroque stylings of "Do Aphrodisiacs Work" to the cool sounds of "Do Some Women Have Trouble Reaching Orgasm" to the horror music of "Are The Findings of Doctors And Clinics Who Do Sexual Research Accurate?" or the romantic music of "What Is Sodomy;" Lowe's music really captures all the moods and styles of the film.

According to Lowe (who is alive and well and still working), he was hired by the producers, and didn't meet Allen until it was time to spot the film. Lowe orchestrated and conducted his score. It was decided later to bookend the film with the song "Let's Misbehave" rather than the main and end titles that Lowe wrote (which are included here). Interestingly, an album was prepared at the time of the film's release, but it never came out.

After *Love and Death*, Allen made *Annie Hall*, which was a turning point for him, and from that point on, rather than take the easy route and repeat himself, he instead grew and evolved as a filmmaker, with such classics as *Manhattan*, *Stardust Memories*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and many, many others (he is probably the most prolific of all film directors of the last fifty years). He continues to be one of the most interesting filmmakers working today – always surprising, always interesting, and always Woody. It's a special treat to finally be able to release these scores from the early, funny ones.

— Bruce Kimmel