

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: Annie Hall

USA, 1977. Rated PG. 93 min

Cast: Woody Allen, Diane Keaton, Tony Roberts, Carol Kane, Paul Simon, Shelley Duvall, Christopher Walken;

Writers: Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman; Cinematographer: Gordon Willis; Producers: Charles Joffe, Jack Rollins; Director: Woody Allen

On April 3, 1978, ANNIE HALL was the belle of the Academy Awards ball. It won Oscars for Best Director (Allen), Best Screenplay (Allen and Brickman), Best Actress (Keaton) and Best Picture (winning over STAR WARS), plus a nomination for Best Actor (Allen). However, Allen was conspicuously absent from the ceremonies. Like his film's alter ego, he was content to spend the evening in his beloved New York, three thousand miles away from any awards show. Besides, he had plans to play clarinet with his jazz band at Michel's, as he had done every Monday night for years.

The gesture was pure, quintessential Woody. Twenty-five years on, awards aside, ANNIE HALL arguably remains his most popular, adored film. Frequently cited as one of the best romantic comedies of all time, it breathes life into the venerable tale of boy meets girl in Manhattan, recast through Allen's ever-distinctive frames. It illustrates all the giddy highs and inevitable complications that come with falling in and out of love. And it boasts the undeniable chemistry of its two equally neurotic leads: Alvy Singer (Allen), a Brooklyn-born stand-up comedian, and Annie Hall (Keaton), an aspiring photographer and singer from Wisconsin. The film unconventionally sifts through various stages of Alvy and Annie's relationship, non-chronologically at first in an almost stream-of-consciousness style. Scenes both significant (their first meeting, their first kiss)

and seemingly mundane and everyday (they wrestle with cooking live lobsters while on vacation in the Hamptons) are given the same attention and care.

One could attribute this construction to the film's unusual backstory. Originally conceived as a two-hour plus murder mystery called *Anhedonia* (or, the inability to experience pleasure – a typical Woody obsession; another proposed title was *It Had To Be Jew*), the film was whittled down by Allen and editor Ralph Rosenblum to 93 minutes. They threw out the mystery and restructured the film around what was



once only a romantic subplot. (Allen would revive the original concept, if not the exact script, 16 years later with *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, which reunited him with Keaton after Mia Farrow backed out of the film.)

Until ANNIE HALL, Allen was best known as a director of manic, zany comedies. *Bananas*, *Take The Money And Run* and all the rest were jam-packed with outrageous slapstick, Marx Brothers-inspired one-liners, and a wide assortment of visual gags. ANNIE HALL is not by any means devoid of these features; be on the lookout for contradictory subtitles, sudden forays into animation and out-of-body experiences, and a surprise, triumphant appearance by (naturally!) Marshall McLuhan. But ANNIE HALL is more serious, sophisticated, melan-

choly, and world-weary than Allen's previous work. It strikes an ambitious balance between screwball comedy and delicate reflection, yet it seems refreshingly direct as it unfolds. It's a funny, full-bodied work that tempers the laughs with the occasional tender, quieter moment.

One can see the film as Allen's cinematic tribute to Diane Keaton. They had dated years before, and the autobiographical parallels between the actors and their characters are unquestionable. Keaton's real last name is Hall, and her nickname was Annie. She had previously co-starred as Allen's comic foil and love interest in *Sleeper*, *Love And Death* and *Play It Again Sam*, where she was often delightful, but secondary. With ANNIE HALL, Allen gave her a more elaborate character, one much more complicated than the "la di da's" she speaks. As Annie, Keaton is not a fool or a WASP-y caricature, but a woman without pretensions, following her own path, gradually coming out of her shell; a kindred spirit to confide in and laugh with. Plus, Annie's androgynous, casually thrown together wardrobe (culled from Keaton's own closet) even sparked a brief fashion trend following the film's release.

ANNIE HALL gently builds to a marvelously bittersweet ending that satisfies while still leaving much unresolved. Perhaps that's what endures most about this film; among all the memorable jokes and inventive diversions, there's an inquisitiveness and honesty about relationships, and real insight into why they sometimes succeed or fail and why we keep coming back for more. ANNIE HALL perfectly captures an imperfect world with comfort, wit, and heart.

- Chris Kriofske