

## STARDUST MEMORIES

*"I love you. I mean, I love your work."*

– fan (Daniel Stern) to director Sandy Bates (Woody Allen) in *STARDUST MEMORIES*

He was born Allen Stewart Konigsberg and became Woody Allen when he entered show business. The line between the person and persona has been a puzzle ever since.

*STARDUST MEMORIES* (1980), Woody Allen's tenth film as a director, continued his late-Seventies shift away from broad comedy. *ANNIE HALL* (1977) and *MANHATTAN* (1979), both co-written with Marshall Brickman, rooted their uproarious comedy in rich character study, while *INTERIORS* (1978) was a straight drama styled after the films of Ingmar Bergman, a hero of Allen's. Is it any surprise then that critics and audiences were quick to infer autobiography in the recurring complaint of *STARDUST MEMORIES'* director Sandy Bates (played by Allen) that he only wants to make serious films going forward? "I don't want to make funny movies anymore," Sandy says. "They can't force me to. I don't feel funny. I look around the world and all I see is human suffering." His agent's counterargument: "Human suffering doesn't sell tickets in Kansas City."

There was more ammunition for conspiracists to confuse the artist with his art: Allen based *STARDUST MEMORIES'* framing device – a weekend retrospective of Sandy Bates' filmography – on a real-life retrospective put on by the film critic Judith Crist. There's also the film's flashback to an argument between Sandy and his one-time girlfriend Dorrie (Charlotte Rampling), in which Dorrie accuses Sandy of flirting with her 13-year-old cousin; inevitably, the viewer calls back to Allen's cinematic pairing with the teen-aged Mariel Hemingway in *MANHATTAN*, not to mention numerous future instances of age-imbalanced romances in Allen's pictures. Further, a backdrop piece of walled art that shifts according to Sandy's mood – happy articulated in a picture of Groucho Marx; distressed, the iconic image of a Viet Cong prisoner being shot in the head – recalibrates here with a blowup of newspaper copy headlined with the word "incest," a squirming reminder for modern viewers of the unsavory allegations leveled against Allen. The sum effect, let's admit, is complicated.

More complicated than we think: According to Allen, the "reality" of *STARDUST MEMORIES*, from its 12-minute mark onward, isn't real. The film opens with a riff on Fellini's *8 1/2*, with Allen (not yet identified, as Sandy or someone else) sitting in a train car packed with desolates – "Fellini faces," Allen puts it. (Pauline Kael's estimation was less honorific: "self-conscious grotesques who might have been photographed by Diane Arbus," she described them.) The sound is mostly mute; the picture rendered in stark blacks-and-whites. (A moment here to acknowledge the gorgeous contributions of Gordon Willis, whose camerawork defined a decade with *ANNIE HALL*, *MANHATTAN*, *ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN*, and *THE GODFATHER PART I & II*, among others.) Allen looks over to another train, perched on a parallel track: The inhabitants (including

a very young Sharon Stone), sip cocktails and cavort with Jazz-Age abandon. Allen (or rather, his character) wants on that train – pounds on the window to be let out, to join the merry-makers – but to no avail. His car winds up at a seaside trash heap. The twist: The other car, the one practically whirring with joie de vivre, dumps its passengers out at the same dump. The bitter rub: Death comes to everyone.

The picture cuts out, and studio execs start squabbling – *he's not funny anymore, he's pretentious, his insights are shallow and morbid* – and we come to realize that the opening sequence is in fact the conclusion to Sandy Bates' latest film, a dramatic hard-turn away from the crowd-pleasing comedies he built a career on. (Interestingly, Allen didn't see Preston Sturges' SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS [1941], another movie about a comedy director trying to go straight – "I want to hold a mirror up to life. I want this to be a picture of dignity! A true canvas of the suffering of humanity!" – until after he made STARDUST MEMORIES. Allen's verdict? "I didn't like it.")

The takeaway from STARDUST's opening sequence: What felt real, turns out – not so much. Allen is instructing his audience here on the film's fluidity between the real and the imagined, but we're apt to forget. The film then comically introduces Bates as an existentially depressed filmmaker chafing at his own celebrity, even as he suckles at it – cue the ineffectual entourage, the ridiculous setpiece in a Rolls Royce (a signpost of STARDUST's intentional absurdity; Allen was never one for gross ostentation), and his home chef, confounded by a convection oven. Watch closely here: After Sandy rails at his cook about the burnt rabbit ("I don't eat rodent!") and hallucinates a fluffy white bunny, we've once again left the real for the imagined. Allen explains the crucial moment's in an interview with Eric Lax: "...as he looks at it the sight of death leads him to a series of thoughts. From then on, the whole film takes place in his mind. It's shot in exaggerated form because it's in the mind."

The film's continued flights of fancy – many openly inspired by *8 1/2* – bolster his claim. There's the cutaway to a pint-sized Sandy Bates, caped like *8 1/2*'s tiny Guido and shooting up in the air like a superhero in a funhouse-mirror version of adult Guido plummeting to earth, and the woodland UFO convention that recalls Guido's last-reel press conference and fantasy-suicide conclusion (here, Sandy is shot by a fan, but that, too, turns out to be fantasy). Post-assassination, the surprise reveal is that this has all been a movie production, signaled when the movie's seeming-romantic rivals Daisy (Jessica Harper) and Isobel (Marie-Christine Barrault) suddenly compare notes and pal around, not unlike Guido's blissful reverie in which his wife and his mistress make peace.

The film, at least, is adamant about the divide between reality and fiction. So why are viewers so insistent about confusing the two? Pauline Kael, in her scorched-earth *New Yorker* review, branded it "the most undisguised of his dodgy mock-autobiographical fantasies" and even accused Allen of anti-Semitism, spying not just Fellini faces but "big-nosed" Jewish caricatures in his crowd of extras ("he sees his subjects as Jews trying to shove him back down in the Jewish clowns' club"). David Thomson's summation is more generous: "Allen has never made a film free from his own panic."

The movie didn't catch on with audiences or critics, which isn't to say it doesn't have its defenders – including Allen, who counted it a favorite: “Everybody said to me, ‘Of course it's your favorite film, because nobody liked it. You're protecting your child, even it's crippled, or blind.’” Some of STARDUST MEMORIES' topics of interest – the creative in crisis, the cult of celebrity – Allen would revisit throughout his career (1997's DECONSTRUCTING HARRY, 1998's CELEBRITY). Whether or not it's accurate, it's no wonder audiences equate the man with his artistic obsessions. In any case, we'll give the last word to Allen himself: “I was never blocked, conflicted much, or steeped in gloom – though I often played that character. ... Of course, the public doesn't know me – only the character I present to create conflict and laughs.”

#### SOURCES:

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