

# How Woody Allen's 'Zelig' Was Born in Anxiety and Grew Into Comedy

Michiko Kakutani

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WOODY ALLEN'S characters have always had more than their share of worries and insecurities: they worry about their lovers, their apartments and the health of their own fragile psyches — not to mention all the big questions about God and love and death. In “Zelig” — Mr. Allen's new film, which opened to critical acclaim Friday — the hero is so insecure, so anxious to be liked, that he literally assumes the personality and physical mien of anyone around him.

His condition as a human chameleon, Mr. Allen said the other day, represents “a minor malady almost everyone suffers from — carried to an extreme.”

With Indians, Leonard Zelig becomes an Indian; with fat men, a fat man; with eminent psychiatrists, an eminent psychiatrist. As a consequence of this unusual talent, Zelig also becomes an instant celebrity: crowds come to stare at him, con men exploit him, and French intellectuals find in him “a symbol for everything.”

As writer, director and star of the film, Woody Allen, too, has found in Zelig a symbol resonant with comic and philosophical possibilities — a remarkably elastic symbol that enables him to examine, with irony and wit, such serious matters as the nature of art, the consequences of celebrity and the appeal of conformity. *Two Years to Make Film*

Told in the form of an old-fashioned documentary, “Zelig” is set during the late 1920's and 30's, those theatrical decades that saw America's gaudy spree of frivolity sink into the shadows of approaching war.

Two years in the making — nine months were required for the editing alone — the film superimposes new material on old newsreel footage and antique photographs, and incorporates interviews with such members of the intellectual community as Saul Bellow, Susan Sontag, Irving Howe and Dr. Bruno Bettelheim.

This complicated cinematic collage actually grew out of an idea Mr. Allen once had for a short story — not even an idea, really, but an observation that people have a terrible tendency to say things that will please their friends.

“It's that need to be liked,” he said, “which on the most basic level leads you to say you liked a particular film or show, or read ‘Moby-Dick’ — when you didn't — just to keep the people around you pacified.

“I thought that desire not to make waves, carried to an extreme, could have traumatic consequences. It could lead to a conformist mentality and, ultimately, fascism. That's why I wanted to use the documentary form: one doesn't want to see this character's private life; one's more interested in the phenomenon and how it relates to the culture. Otherwise it would just be the pathetic story of a neurotic.”

Disparate in style but all insistently moral in vision, Mr. Allen's movies, in fact, have always focused on both the existential dilemmas of individuals and the relation of those problems to society at large. In Zelig's case, the affliction — his loss of identity — is a common modern ailment, and Mr. Allen says he probably suffers from it himself “no more or less than anyone else.” *On Being Someone Else*

Earnest and somewhat shy, Mr. Allen readily acknowledged that he once wrote a line that reads, “His one regret in life is that he is not someone else.” The line appears in the “About the Author” note contained in collections of his prose.

The publisher, Mr. Allen recalled, “had written this paragraph full of terrific things about my movies, and I was reading it and, just for a capper, penciled in that sentence, sort of negating everything before it. I wrote it as a joke, but perhaps it’s a more revealing joke than I thought at the time.”

Certainly Zelig’s gradual discovery of his identity mirrors Mr. Allen’s own discovery, as a writer and director, of a distinctive cinematic voice. Not only has his screen persona matured -Isaac Davis, the vulnerable, conflicted hero of “Manhattan,” bears little resemblance indeed to the cartoonlike heroes of “Take the Money and Run” and “Bananas” — but Mr. Allen, himself, has also emerged as an accomplished film auteur, skilled at articulating his intensely personal concerns and his own vision of the world.

Ironically enough, Mr. Allen started in show business relying — not unlike Zelig — on a gift for mimicry. As a high school student, he began selling jokes and was soon providing such stars as Bob Hope, Sid Caesar and Pat Boone with lines. Later, during his early days as a stand-up monologist, he recalls that “there was a tendency at first to lean on other comedians I liked, like Mort Sahl.” *Growing and Developing*

“When you have such a response to other people’s work, it can creep into your bone marrow,” he said, “but as you relax and become more accomplished, it encourages your own growth and development.”

In his films as well, straightforward parody — “Take the Money and Run,” “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex” and “Bananas,” for instance, featured send-ups of Ingmar Bergman and Sergei Eisenstein -gradually gave way to sophisticated satire. And as Mr. Allen grew more assured, he was able to integrate the comedy with the drama: the humor, once employed as a kind of defense mechanism, became a means of illuminating his characters’ hopes and fears.

Film making “is such an involved medium, technically and financially, that one tends in the beginning to fall back on one’s strongest suit, and in my case it was getting laughs,” Mr. Allen explained. “After I started to develop a little technique and didn’t have to worry about mere survival, I tried to express myself personally; and as I succeeded, maybe I became overly bullish about it. After ‘Annie Hall’ was received well, I felt bullish enough to do ‘Interiors.’ And after ‘Manhattan’ was successful, I felt I could make ‘Stardust Memories.’ ”

“Stardust,” like “Zelig,” explores the perils of success, and both movies underline Mr. Allen’s belief that “fame and artistic achievement do not save someone from the slings and arrows of life; they don’t provide solace if you’re in search of some existential meaning.” In “Stardust,” Sandy Bates, a disaffected film director, finds that celebrity only heightens his fears of death and aging, and the pain of unrequited love. And Zelig -one minute, adored; the next, reviled — also experiences the fickleness of success. *Accidents and Good Luck*

As a celebrity, Mr. Allen noted, Zelig also represents the apotheosis of the artist beyond his real worth — a thesis also touched upon in “Interiors.” “It’s just good luck if you’re an artist,” he said. “It’s not something you can take credit for. While you could say Zelig was blessed with a certain talent, that didn’t mean he was a better human being. Frequently one’s talent is developed because of feelings of inadequacy and being unable to cope; it’s a combination of a God-given gift and accidents of environment.

“In my own case, I was probably lucky enough to have a certain talent, but I used to joke that if I were born as an Apache Indian, what good would my sense of humor do? I was lucky enough to be born in a culture that values humor. Contemporary society tends to worship the artist, when, in fact, real values have to do with qualities like being able to give and courage. To be told, say, your X-rays are bad and to deal with that with dignity — something like that’s so beyond the accident of birth involved in talent.”

As for Zelig’s talent, he is eventually cured of his “creative illness” by a devoted woman psychiatrist, but as his neuroses disappear, so do his celebrated abilities. He becomes an ordinary man.

“Some people who have seen the film think Zelig was better off when he could change into other people and perform miraculous acts,” Mr. Allen said. “But the price he paid was being an unhappy, empty human being. In the end, he settles down to a kind of middle road in life — he’s married and living someplace and not doing anything miraculous. Some people say they wouldn’t want to trade the excitement and the creativity for that. I don’t happen to agree.” Does Therapy Inhibit Art?

Whether therapy can impair the roots of an artist’s creativity or can further liberate his imagination, he adds, is an issue still open to debate. In his own case, however, it is clear that two decades of analysis have not inhibited his art. Indeed he has continued to grow as an artist, continually stretching his talents and abilities.

Even as “Zelig” opened to critical acclaim, the director was back at work last week editing “Broadway Danny Rose” — “a little black-and-white human comedy” — which will be released early next year. And in September, he will begin shooting yet another picture, which he describes as “experimental” in form.

“The important thing,” he said, “is not to become trapped by your success. You get famous and want to repeat it. After something like ‘Annie Hall,’ you say ‘I won’t do that again,’ but the tendency is to kid yourself and do another one anyway because you enjoy the approbation that comes with commercial success. I’ve said it’s a healthy thing to fail a couple times, because then you know you’re on the right track. I’ve felt that what I wanted to do and continue to try to do is different types of films.”

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