

Thumbnail Woody

by Kirby Ferguson

With the scandal of last year, Woody Allen's name has become a snicker-snicker, nudge-in-the-side joke. The fact that his return to fame came in such a way is a depressing commentary. Since the eighties, Allen's prolificacy, inconsistency and nihilism have scared off all but a dedicated minority of fans. Still, Woody Allen at his best is one of America's greatest film makers.

Woody Allen's career is best experienced as a series of peaks; his exhausting prolificacy insures he can't be brilliant every time out. These peaks (*Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Crimes and Misdemeanours*) are the consummation of less successful earlier

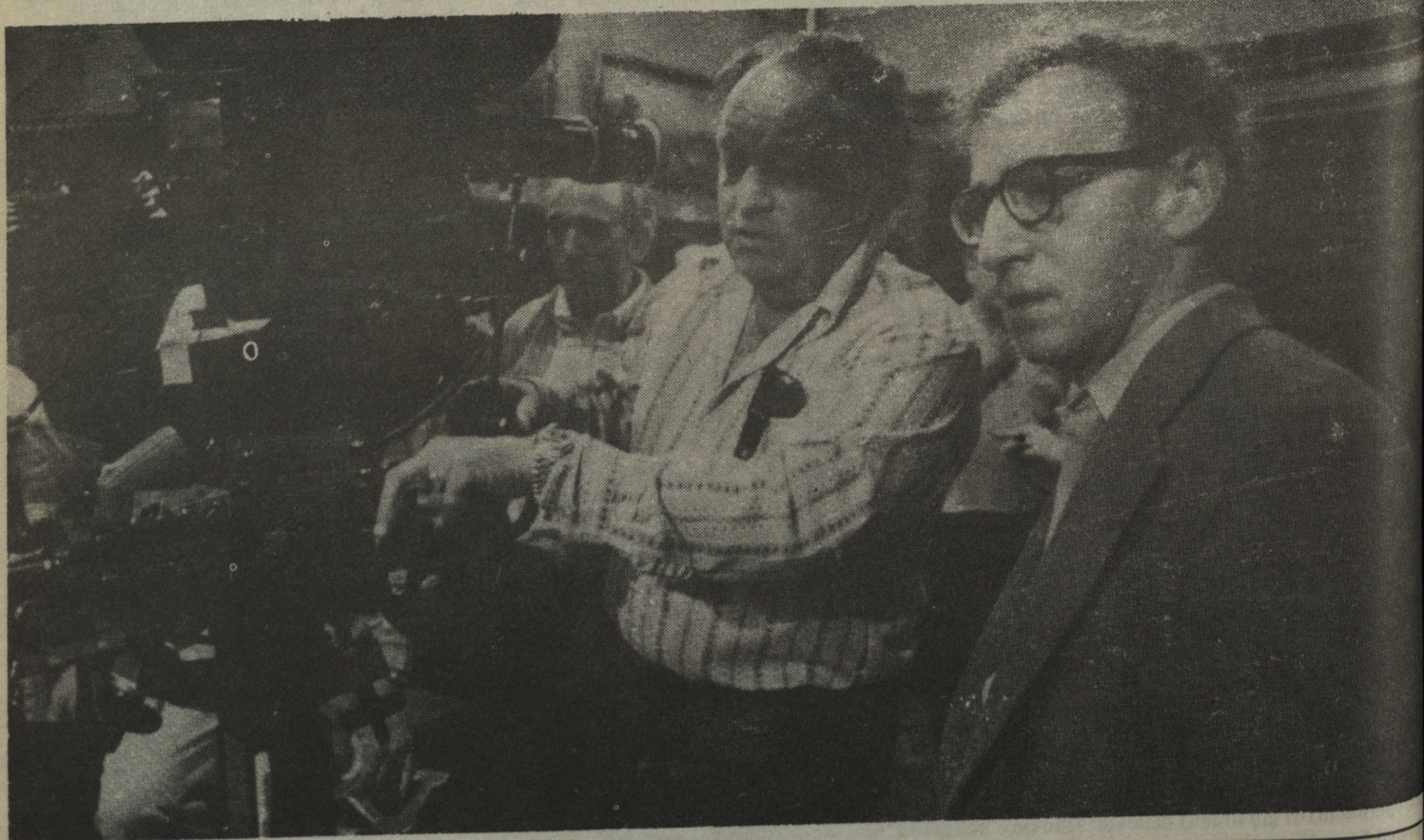
efforts. His real gift, of course, is his ability to make us laugh. Before the benchmark *Annie Hall*, Allen produced a series of wacky, hilarious comedies, shoddily directed affairs with plot and characters being subordinate to the nonstop gags. Of these, *Love and Death* is the funniest, and possibly his funniest ever. His next film, *Annie Hall*, was the culmination of his earlier work. An imaginative film with actual characters, *Annie Hall* remains his best loved and most influential film, and is the virtual blueprint for the modern romantic comedy.

Allen hinted at his nihilism by following up *Annie Hall* with the bleak drama *Interiors*, the first of a trilogy of dour Ingmar Bergman de-

rivatives. Drained of their humour, Allen's films make his world of analysts and infidelity and bohemian angst seem petty, which could be a triumph depending on how you see things.

Allen rebounded in 1979 and released *Manhattan*, a dramatic comedy which finds him going for more life-like situations and presenting some gorgeous cinematography -- far removed from his amateurish earlier efforts.

Once again Allen bit the hand that fed him in 1980 and unleashed *Stardust Memories*, a fairly traditional Allen comedy except for its nonstop, grotesque images of his fans, shot in unforgiving black and white. But for those who've attended Allen's films at the theatre, the perspective of *Stardust Memories* is actually



Woody Allen on the set of *Crimes and Misdemeanours*