

The Unshine Boys

By Sara Vilkomerson

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"It used to be Diane Keaton with me—she always used to tell me, 'I'm terrible, I'm awful, I can't do it, you should get someone else.' And she was always brilliant. Well, Larry is like this," said Woody Allen via telephone from his Upper East Side apartment last week. The 73-year-old director was discussing his new movie *Whatever Works*, which stars Larry David, and will open the Tribeca Film Festival on April 22 before hitting theaters in June.

"I'd always been a fan. ... I asked him to do it, and he said, 'But I can't act! I can only do what I do, I'm not an actor, you'll be disappointed,'" said Mr. Allen. "You know, those are the ones who can always do it. The ones that tell you how great they are can never do it. Larry is all, 'I can't do it. I can't do it,' but when it came time to do it, right out of the box, he did it. And not just the comedy, which I expected, but all the other things he had to do which required acting and emotions and being touching and all that—he did that, too."

"I didn't even know I was on his radar, to tell you the truth," said Larry David, 61, with utmost seriousness, speaking from Los Angeles a couple of days later. "I'm very surprised about that. When you hear that Woody Allen is a fan of yours ... " He paused. "It's surprising.

"I gave him every opportunity to get someone else. I was kind of uncomfortable. I was out of my comfort zone," he said. Then he laughed. "Of course, the comfort zone is not very big! I take one step to the right and I'm out of my comfort zone."

So, a new Woody Allen movie starring Larry David filmed right here in New York City. Could there be a more deep-fried mix of talent, comedy and neuroses? For most of us, Woody Allen is as quintessential New York as the Chrysler Building. Many New Yorkers grew up with a vision of this city spun by Annie Hall and Manhattan and Hannah and Her Sisters, where the skyline always twinkles and romance lurks around every limestoned corner; where brainy, nervous men charm young and naïve beautiful women in grand prewar apartments lined with bookshelves; where there are country weekends with lobsters to chase and always—always—love to find and fail. And then there's Larry David, another Brooklyn boy made good, co-creator and writer of *Seinfeld*, which defined New York all over again in the '90s, with its exquisite, endless examinations and sweating of the small stuff—soup Nazis, being master of the domain, parking garages and puffy shirts. Since his 1999 HBO special *Larry David: Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and the still-airing series that followed, he's made performance masterpieces of excruciating situations. The news that he was to star in Mr. Allen's latest had some rubbing their hands in anticipatory delight, others sharpening their knives, all anxious to see if Mr. David could pull off the ultimate as a Woody misanthropic paradigm.

(This is harder than it might seem ... remember the disastrous Jason Biggs turn in 2003's *Anything Else?* Kenneth Branagh in *Celebrity?*)

But we'll go ahead and say it: *Whatever Works* is Woody Allen exactly as you want your Woody Allen to be. It's witty, dark, poignant, zany and hilarious, and showcases a New York filtered through the Allen lens as

we've never seen it before. Meaning, forget the Upper East Side! This film creeps through the crooked and narrow streets of the Lower East Side and Chinatown, knishes to hanging chickens.

And as for Mr. David ... he indeed pulls it off and then some playing Boris Yellnikoff, a half-suicidal almost-Nobel Prize-winning physicist who suffers from night terrors (he wakes up with strangling death screams) and minor OCD (he washes his hands and sings "Happy Birthday"—twice!—in order to kill all the germs), then tosses it all away (literally) and considers the majority of Earth's population too stupid and meaningless to even deal with.

The Woody angel who enters this time—the beloved innocent woman—is Evan Rachel Wood as Melody, a teenage Southern runaway who manages to entrance Boris in spite of himself. A May-December romance (familiar to all Allen devotees) follows with its inevitable complications, but darker than usual—heartbreak ensues. Don't ask! Filling in any and all gaps is a terrific supporting cast including Patricia Clarkson, Michael McKean and Ed Begley Jr.

Whatever Works is as nimble as his smaller comedies but still feels like a big Woody film, in the Hannah dimension. It also seems to carry the well-tempered glow of late Woody Allen with a well-satisfied view of late life and with few illusions. And a great surmounting romantic joke. And somehow Larry David of all people has the ideal astringency for a Woody Allen protagonist, cutting through the plot without giving up the layers of sentimentality and darkness that make the soot of his New York romances.

MR. ALLEN SAID he originally wrote Whatever Works, his 39th feature-length film, with Zero Mostel (another great Brooklyn Jewish comedian and Mel Brooks' original Max Bialystock from the Producers) in mind for the role of Boris. But Mostel died in 1977 and Mr. Allen put the script in a drawer. He said that when he decided he wanted to film something in New York again after shooting his last four films in Europe, he dusted it off and updated it.

The title refers to a rather pragmatic philosophy when it comes to our treacherous human hearts, namely that if you should find something or someone in your life that makes you happy, go with it—regardless if it might appear, at first glance, to be all wrong. "I do believe in that strongly myself," Mr. Allen said. "As long as you're not hurting anybody ... or doing anything that's causing any mischief or hurting anyone or anything awful, that whatever works to get through your life is fine. All the nonsense about what one should be doing and shouldn't be doing and what's quote unquote appropriate according to what I call the appropriate police—it's nonsense. It's a tough scuffle through life," he said. "A tragic situation. Whatever gets you through—as long as it doesn't hurt anybody else—is fine."

Whatever Works has its fair share of dark corners, but audiences may be pleasantly surprised at its ultimately sunny rom-com message. It's strange to think that Mr. Allen wrote this film decades ago, long before we learned far too much about his own private romantic struggles (though its doctrine is an easy leap from his infamous "The heart wants what it wants" remark to Time magazine in 1992 amidst the Mia/Soon-Yi scandal).

"I think my philosophy has been consistent over the years, and it appears either persuasive or idiotic depending on how good the film is," he said. "If I make a film and the film itself works, then I feel people come away saying, 'Gee, the philosophy here makes sense.' And if I make a film where I've struck out and I've made bad artistic choices and the film is not good, then they think, 'His ideas are stupid and narcissistic and irrelevant.' But really the ideas have always been the same ... it's just that I've failed artistically."

The concept of things seeming right versus being right has indeed popped up in Mr. Allen's films before. But *Whatever Works* might be the only film that so plainly and deeply examines it. At the start of the film, Boris looks around at his comfy life, his just-right uptown apartment and appropriate spouse, and realizes he feels miserable and trapped enough to die (something he manages to fail at, too). He trades it all in for a ratty bathrobe, teaching chess and holding forth in cramped coffee shops—often while looking straight into the camera and speaking to the audience directly. Yet happiness is lurking for him, even if he doesn't know it, in the most unusual of places.

"This happens all the time," said Mr. Allen. "You meet somebody, you have a relationship with that person, and, on paper, it just seems completely logical and right and it is right, and yet for some inexplicable reason, you go and gravitate toward the person who is consummately wrong for you, and makes your life into a hell. And that still attracts you more. And had you settled for the person who was right on paper, you indeed would not have been happy."

Back in Los Angeles, Larry David considered the "whatever works" philosophy as it might apply to him (in fact, he took a night to think about it before phoning *The Observer* back with his thoughts).

"Even though something might be right on paper, it doesn't necessarily mean that it will work," he said. "Whereas something very odd on paper could be perfect, and something about that person makes you feel good. That's the most important thing," he said. "Usually for me, those are the first people I reject. The ones that make me feel good. Why should I feel good when there are women who can't stand me and whom I can't be myself around? Those are the ones I want."

This sort of sentiment is exactly what we'd expect to hear from Mr. David on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where he plays a bizarre version of himself. But consider this: If that persona, the one we think we know ("What I'm playing on TV is not really me," he said. "Although I've said many times that I wish it was"), is now, in *Whatever Works*, playing yet another cinematic version of Woody Allen, we're now into Lost-levels of confusion when it comes to the line between performer and reality. Where are we? Is Boris, with his crushing anxieties and disgust with the human race, a representation of the director himself?

"I don't know Woody that well, but it's pretty obvious it's at least a bit of some of who Woody is," Mr. David said. "He must have seen something in me to make a passable stand-in for him." Mr. David said he had brought Annie Hall home recently for his 14-year-old daughter to watch. "She couldn't get through it because [Woody's character] reminded her too much of me. She can't watch me, either. As far as I know, we're the only two people she's said that about."

ONE COULD SPEND hours listing the similarities between Mr. Allen and Mr. David (both New York-born, outer-borough Jewish comedians with wicked dark streaks, a certain amount of performative self-hatred plus self-regard, sharp pens, significant intellectual chops and even sharper tongues), but the differences are more interesting. For example, though both men may be called pessimists, the ways in which they are pessimistic are quite contrary.

"I think [Woody's] probably more of a pessimist about the big picture," Mr. David said. "The hopelessness, meaninglessness of it all—the blackness of eternity—those questions. Whereas I suspect I'm probably more pessimistic about the smaller things: The relationship won't work out, Obama will lose, the Yankees will lose,

the movie will bomb—things like that. People won't watch ball games with me because I'm so pessimistic. I'm no fun to be around." (But what happens when Obama does win? "I know! My whole world goes topsy-turvy. I still can't believe it," he said.)

Case in point, perhaps, was Mr. Allen's response to what *The Observer* had felt was a pretty straightforward happy resolution in the film. "I'm always so didactic in everything I do, and so heavy-handed, I wanted it to be clear that even though it was a happy ending, we all still remain in this dreadfully tragic predicament, and a tragic life, and that the story did end with a certain amount of temporary happiness," he said. Um, really? "I did want to portray Larry's take on life as closer to reality than other people. He might seem like a complainer, a malcontent, like a misanthrope, a cynic, a nihilist—whatever words you want to impute to him, but there's a great deal of sad truth to his perceptions. And I wanted to make that very clear at the end of the movie."

Larry David laughed when later told of his director's assessment. "I think generally it feels that there are moments of joy, but at the bottom it's doom and gloom. O.K., so there's a big pool of doom and gloom and every now and then you can swim up to the surface like a dolphin and get some joy and then you go back under."

"I have what I call, what I would perceive to be, a very realistic view of life, whereas other people criticize me all the time as being, you know, cynical and misanthropic and nihilistic," Mr. Allen said. "You know, I don't think I am! It's possible that I am and I have a blind spot. But I don't think so. I think my perception of it is correct—that it's a tragic event and it takes real improvising and real luck and real work to get through it."

By all accounts, the shoot for *Whatever Works* was a pleasant one. Mr. Allen directs long, difficult takes, but keeps civilized hours, and for the New York natives like Patricia Clarkson, it was a chance to walk home from work. Michael McKean, who plays one of Boris' few friends, had worked with Mr. Allen in the 2004 Atlantic theater production of *Secondhand Memory*. He said Mr. Allen seemed particularly energized and happy. "He seemed to be in good spirits," Mr. McKean said. "He had a great relationship with his DP and the rest of the crew. The thing with him is that he knows what he wants, that's key. And he had a really good group." Mr. McKean said he would take Mr. David and Ms. Wood (recommended for the role by Mr. Allen's wife) to Katz's deli for late-night corned beef.

"He writes these really beautiful notes," said Ms. Clarkson, of receiving her second Woody Allen script. "Like with *Whatever Works*—it's always something funny like, 'If you have something better to do, I'll understand.' And then I open the script and it's this divine part."

And when she says notes, she means notes! No emails for Woody Allen. "It's gone past me," he said, of the Internet age. "I don't have a computer, I don't have a word processor or any of that stuff. I've never been able to work on instruments. I don't get gadgets at all. I have a typewriter and still, after all these years, have great trouble changing the ribbon on it." He paused. "I know I'm missing something. I know when friends Google instant information or things"—he keeps a Webster's dictionary close by—"it just seems so futuristic to me! I'm still plodding and doing it the other way. I don't say that proudly, or like it's a good thing. I don't think it's a good thing. I've just never been able to make the transition."

Mr. Allen said he always tells his actors to paraphrase him. "If you're going to ask for a divorce, ask for a divorce," he said. "Do it in your own words." Mr. David, an excellent improviser by nature, wound up wanting to stick to the script, though he said he had the urge in the beginning of shooting to try to change things around.

“I’ve been speaking my own words my entire life,” Mr. David said. “It started to get a bit refreshing to get someone else’s words in my mouth.” (Did he ever, The Observer wondered, start to feel comfortable in his leading role? “Maybe the next-to-last day,” he laughed. “Yeah, on the last day I was like, you know what? I thought this is pretty easy!”)

MR. ALLEN SAID that now that he’s finished his film—he’s done the foreign prints, he’s completed the DVD color corrections—he’ll never see it again.

“I made *Take the Money and Run* in 1968 and I’ve never seen it since, or any of the others.” But surely he’ll attend the glitzy Ziegfeld Tribeca Film Festival premiere on the 22nd? Mr. Allen said no, he never actually sits through the films. “I go in and walk on the red carpet ... smile ... answer the questions, and then I sit down and the second the lights dim, I’m out. I’m at a restaurant with my wife and we have dinner. And then I go to the party afterwards and go back into phony social mode where people are exchanging enormous insincerities. They’ve hated the film but they’re saying, ‘Gee, great film. Great film.’”

You might expect this kind of gloom from Boris, but not from Woody Allen!

“I can’t ever say I’ve been happy with my films,” he said quietly. “It’s always the same story: I set out to make them and I’m setting out to make, you know, the greatest thing ever made. *Citizen Kane* or *Othello*. But by the time I’ve finished, when the compromises set in, and I’ve screwed this up artistically and I couldn’t get that actor and I didn’t have enough money for this, and I guessed wrong on this joke ... by the time I put the picture together, I’ve gone from being sure that I was going to make the next great American masterpiece to just praying that it won’t be an embarrassment.” Mr. Allen sighed. “So I find myself in the cutting room, scrambling, taking a moment out of here and sticking it there. Putting a piece of music in here, and patching up something there, and hoping that I’ll just breath and survive. I’ve already abandoned all integrity and all hope of an uncompromising masterpiece.”

By reaching out to Larry David in *Whatever Works*, Woody Allen has added something to his canon that he might never have gotten on his own. He hired the one working comedian who could put a knife edge on the usual adorableness of the Woody Allen interpreter. *Whatever Works* may not be an uncompromising masterpiece, but it’s the astonishing collaboration of two uncompromising comic masters of the romantic and tortured New York psyche.

And it works.

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