



Sheetal Sheth, Albert Brooks and Ducan Bravo in *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*.

## CAN'T WE ALL JUST LAUGH ALONG?

### *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*

review by M. Faust

Before there was Larry David there was Albert Brooks, who has long been willing to take the part of a jerk in the interest of pursuing his comic and satirical goals. His persona is that of a guy you laugh at, not with, a concept that few performers want to embrace in a day when non-stop tabloid journalism has the effect of erasing the line between public performance and private character.

*Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, his seventh film as a writer-director, is a bit of a return to his 1970s form. Once again he uses his own name to play a Hollywood comedian and filmmaker, hired by the US government as part of a new initiative to try to understand the cultures of countries that are hostile to us. His assignment is to spend a month in India and Pakistan and write a 500-page report on what Muslims find funny.

That's such a great idea that you can't help but wish this were a real documentary, or a real government program. Barring that, it's a pretty good premise for a comedy about American isolationism and xenophobia, which initially seems to be the direction that Brooks is taking it in.

Accompanied by government agents Stuart (John Carrol Lynch) and Mark (Jon Tenney), whose main function seems to be to explain that the lack of support he's getting is typical of all government operations, Brooks rents an office in New Dehli, hires a secretary/translator, and sets about trying to fulfill his assignment. Stopping people in the street to interview them doesn't work very well, especially when he identifies himself as being with the US government. Shocked to find that there are no comedy clubs in New Dehli ("Why would there be?" says his secretary), he decides to put on a stand-up show of his own for research. The show flops because Brooks' material is about parodying the clichés of comedy, clichés that are unknown to his Indian viewers. (To be honest, this stuff may go over the heads of a lot of American viewers too.)

All things being equal, *Looking for Comedy* is a moderately funny movie. The best parts poke fun at Hollywood backbiting, especially an opening scene with Brooks auditioning for a role with director Penny Marshall (also

playing herself). Ditto Brooks' meeting with the Washington committee headed by actor/politician Fred Dalton Thompson, who mentions that Brooks was picked because "Our first two choices were working... As far as we can tell, you're a pretty respected comedian."

But all things aren't equal. The original distributor of the movie dropped it because of its title, and they may not have been entirely wrong in doing so. Brooks' fans understand that the point of his films is to mock the pretensions and tunnel vision of the character he plays; the people around him exist to react with incomprehension and shock to his ill-considered ideas. Viewers unfamiliar with that may feel that the films' Muslims, by reacting in the same (entirely appropriate way) to Brooks, are being portrayed negatively. At the very least, we come away from the film thinking no differently about them when we went in (maybe even a little worse, given a poorly considered line in which an Iranian character talks about explosives training as if it were a standard course at Tehran Community College).

What Brooks needed, I think, was a scene in which Muslims are shown laughing at something simple and universal, like the hard-worked convicts laughing at cartoons in Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*. That could have left his character at the end of the film trying to take 500 pages to say "Muslims laugh at the same things we do," rather than a labored satire showing the extreme damage he has unknowingly caused.

Brooks can't be taken to task for the misunderstandings that exist among different cultures in the world today, and it seems obvious that he wanted in his own way to do something about them. (In an interview included with the press notes for the film, he says, "I don't believe in this new era of conflict that the United States has done one-tenth what they should do on the cultural side. Trying to find out about other people; the idea that America is interested, that is intriguing." He succeeded less at promoting cross-cultural understanding than at simply making a typically funny Albert Brooks movie, which hopefully will be taken for nothing more or less than that. **av**)



Scarlett Johansson in *Match Point*

## NEW GROWTH IN OLD WOOD[Y]

### *Match Point*

review by M. Faust

Most of you who go to see *Match Point* will do so in the knowledge that it is a new film by Woody Allen. Some will go because of that, maybe a few in spite of it. A lot of people will also avoid it for that reason, including people who use to count themselves among his fans. I sympathize: certainly nothing he has made since 1999's *Sweet and Lowdown* has given us much hope to expect anything other than increasingly tired reworkings of his older films from the new ones that he continues to grind out on a yearly basis.

Here's what you do. Keep your eyes closed during the 30 or 40 seconds while the opening credits (done in the same familiar white-on-black style he's adhered to for thirty years) are on screen. After that, forget that you're watching a Woody Allen movie. It won't be hard to do: a passing reference to Strindberg is about the only thing it has in common with the ossified Allen style. And you'll be glad you did, because *Match Point* is a shining example of what may be Hollywood's most endangered species, an intelligent gimmick-free drama.

What's that you say? A drama? I understand your trepidation. Allen has not exactly done his best work when he turned away from comedy. Films like *Interiors*, *September* and *Another Woman* were all too obviously the work of a man desperate to escape his reputation as a clown, yearning to be taken as seriously as the dour filmmakers and playwrights he most admired. Better that he work his concerns about the meaninglessness of life into the context of a comedy.

Allen has a lot of cause to be satisfied with *Match Point*. But one of the biggest reasons is that it provides a kind of key for many of his earlier movies, a light on meanings that may have escaped viewers who wanted to believe that his serious concerns were simply a comic tool.

Set and filmed in London, *Match Point* is the story of Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), a former tennis pro who has decided that he doesn't have the kind of drive and ambition it takes to succeed in that game. In an introductory narration, he tells us that life is far more dependent on luck than most people want to admit. It's like a tennis ball in play that hits the top of the net and hangs in the air for a split second: if it goes one way you win, the other way you lose.

Taking a job as a tennis instructor, Chris meets and befriends Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode), son of a rich industrialist. Tom is his guide into a life of comfort and security.

He introduces Chris to his family, who take a liking to him, especially sister Chloe (Emily Mortimer), who sees Chris as husband material. Tom also introduces him to his own fiancée Nola (Scarlett Johansson), a struggling actress of whom Tom's family disapproves.

Chris likes Chloe, loves her, marries her. He's taken into the family firm and slides up the ladder to success. But he has an unshakeable lust for Nola, one both of them know can come to no good end.

That may sound like the stuff of a James M. Cain novel, and Allen is certainly playing with the conventions of film noir. When Chris first spots Nola beating Tom at the ping-pong table, she gives him a sultry smile and asks, "So who's my next victim?" Aha, we think, we know this story. Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*, perhaps; the femme fatale and the amoral sap she leads around by his prick.

One of the things that makes *Match Point* so satisfying is that Allen has written a story that comes from that somewhat hackneyed tradition yet manages to surprise us. In fact, he surprises us twice. He draws out the genre conventions in unexpected ways, culminating in a sequence that is surprisingly and genuinely suspenseful. Then, just when we think that he's given up his film's theme for the sake of a good story, he pulls it back, revealing that this is after all a story about luck, something that cuts in two directions. At the age of seventy, Allen more than ever believes that we live in a cold, indifferent universe. Of course, he has always expressed that belief, but if in his other films we wrote it off as the neurotic whinings of a professional nebbish, this time we believe him.

*Match Point* is the first film Allen has directed outside of his native Manhattan, a city with which he had come to be almost inextricably identified, and the change has done him a world of good. Gone are just about all of the tics and bits of business that had come to dominate his films; gone are the performances that sound like they're trying to imitate Allen's voice. Despite being a bit on the long side (a few minutes over two hours), this is a tightly written, keenly focused film, with no unnecessary asides or subplots.

Allen has already completed a second film in London, and has signed a contract to make one next year in Barcelona. On the basis of this film, I hope he never comes back. **av**