

Woody Allen's New Trilogy?

Maurice Yacowar

Ever the one to serve up old whines in new battles, Woody Allen replays familiar themes and strategies in his three new one-act plays. Indeed, the familiarity of his material by now approximates to ritual. But a close examination finds fresh nuance and development. Moreover, as their coincidental language and themes make the plays a triptych, even a familiar element gains new meaning from the enlarged context.

Like most of his films since *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979), the trilogy deals with amoral rationalization, betrayal, and infidelity among the urbane intelligentsia. As he anatomizes his neighborhood's Civilization and Its Discontents, each title cites a location that connotes class, affluence, and sophistication—"Riverside Drive," "Old Saybrook," "Central Park West"—yet the relationships prove savage. The first and third refer to Allen's own Upper West Side. The first play's hero, Jim Swain, lives at Central Park West and 78th.¹ The middle setting offers escape, to the Connecticut slick of *Annie Hall*'s alien gentile/genteel family—but which also includes the psychopathic brother Duane (Christopher Walken). As the setting returns home, the lead characters return to their original relationships, their escapes thwarted. They clutch their illusions with the bittersweet resignation that closes *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), where Cecilia (Mia Farrow) sinks back hopeless into her fantasies.

The first two plays were originally produced by Atlantic Theatre Company in New York under the title *Writer's Block* (2003), with Allen's debut as stage director. They center upon—as it happens—blocked writers. Freed from blockage, the third presents the disintegration of a successful psychoanalyst, her marriage, her friendships, and finally her illusions. Taken as a whole, the three plays detail the frustrations of modern intellectuals as they confront their mortality, cosmic doom, and the destructive compulsions of contemporary (a)morality.

In "Riverside Drive," 50-ish writer Jim Swain is accosted by a "large, unsavory type" actually named Fred Savage, a roughened alternative to the courtly "swain."² Savage is an admitted mental case who believes he receives orders from radio

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signals. Savage is convinced that Swain stole from his overheard musings the plot for his successful film script. As the rough fancies himself the writer's more insightful collaborator, he is a crazy version of Cheech (Chazz Palmentieri), the gunsel genius playwright in *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994).

Savage uncovers a second betrayal: Jim's adultery with Barbara, for whom he is waiting in order to end their affair. When Barbara tries to blackmail Jim for \$500,000, Savage throws her in the Hudson River. By restoring Jim's marital security, Savage establishes a more serious claim upon Jim than his script idea. However crazy, Savage is not necessarily altruistic. Having anticipated Barbara's demands when he sought "money—some kind of payment and a credit of some sort," in killing her, he eliminates a rival for Jim's payment.³

The weather—a chilly "mizzle—mist and drizzle"—characterizes all three characters' lives. Savage's madness has left him broken, divorced, homeless.⁴ Jim has withdrawn his warmth from his marriage and now from his affair. Barbara is victimized by both men and by her greed when she is dumped, then drowned. Given all their pragmatism, the fog is moral as much as climatic.

As Savage describes his anti-psychotic "cocktail," "I don't drink it out of a stemmed glass." Savage and Jim define the same class distance that Judah (Martin Landau) and his underworld brother Jack (Jerry Orbach) do in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). There too the ostensibly upright citizen, threatened by his mistress Dolores (Anjelica Huston) with blackmail, to preserve his image and security, has her killed. In that way Savage proves Jim needs him as "a collaborator" in life as in art. Similarly, in *Bullets Over Broadway*, Cheech not only rewrites the hero's play, but also kills the bad actress to preserve the show's integrity. Here Jim, flustered by Barbara, finally accepts Savage's claim upon him: "Say something, you're my collaborator! . . . I need a fresh concept." As Jim's comfort turns murderous, he evokes Savage's slogan—from his ad writer days—for a Japanese air-conditioner: "They're sleek, they're silent, they'll freeze your ass off." As Savage personifies the indecorous truth, "Company would not go for it."⁵ But Jim comes to accept him.

Foreshadowing Barbara's oblivion, Savage remarks that a cap thrown into the river would reach the ocean in twenty minutes. The image is of modern life reverting to the primordial. Reversing the river's movement toward civilization—in bathetic specific, Poughkeepsie—is inconceivable. The title of Jim's film, *The Journey*, establishes Allen's overall theme—modern life journeying back to primitive urges, the intellect reverting to older and wilder compulsions. By this inverse value the psychotic Savage claims to "outrank" the merely neurotic Jim.⁶ Jim's journey from wife Lola to mistress Barbara and back pulls him to the savage, Fred.

As the smug innocent discovers his own guilt, the shadow of Alfred Hitchcock falls across the play. When Jim imagines killing Barbara and framing a stranger, he would register in the hotel as "Sam and Felicity Arbogast." In Hitchcock's

Psycho (1960), Sam is Marion Crane's avenging lover and Arbogast, the insurance investigator Norman Bates murders. Though there is no Felicity in Hitchcock, he is always felicitous. More pointedly, Jim recalls an *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* TV episode: "I read a story once where the guy beat someone to death with a leg of lamb and then ate the murder weapon."⁷ In "Lamb to the Slaughter" (1958), Roald Dahl's adaptation of his short story, a policeman's wife (Barbara Bel Geddes) beats her unfaithful husband to death with a frozen leg of lamb, then serves the weapon to the investigating police. In unconscious protection, especially since his mistress has the actress's name, Jim switches the killer's gender.

In that light/shadow, Jim's complicity with a psychotic killer recalls Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Savage's unsolicited collaboration parallels Bruno's (Robert Walker) fatal service to Guy (Farley Granger). To Jim's "But she's a human being," Savage responds, "You say that like it's a good thing. . . . I don't know. Have you ever gone to a tenants' meeting in a co-op?" Savage is a variation on Bruno's madness and misanthropy. To Savage and Bruno (and Cheech and Judah), murder is not "the ultimate act. To a more creative mind like mine it's—another option." At the end, Savage explains his preemptory deed: "That's the difference between us two—with you it would have been labored and overanalyzed. This is not real, that's not logical. To me it just *felt* right."⁸ Savage pretends to the intuition of an artist.

More generally, Allen turns Hitchcock when his upright citizen finds himself considering and then benefiting from murder. Having dipped into his dark side, the innocent can never recover his old peace, however happy his ending. His innocence is lost. As normalcy resumes here, Jim calls to tell his wife he loves her and will pick her up at work, while Savage responds to another of his voices. Their last words are parallel openings. Jim fumbles with "I love you . . . I—oh, Lola—" and Savage closes the play with the more upbeat but sinister invitation: "Come in!"⁹ Both men are resigned to their helplessness.

Allen also shows a Hitchcockian black humor. Unable to keep his stories straight, Savage has another homeless man variously die by getting his throat cut in a shelter and by having a piano fall on him in the street. The forms of death derive from the urban melodrama and the slapstick cartoon, respectively. Anyway, "Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds."¹⁰

As Hitchcock undermined the rational, Allen exposes the limits of the intellect. His panhandler was once a classy ad writer, so this Savage can quote Sartre: "After the age of thirty a man is responsible for his own face" [sic]. Jim contends the source is Camus. For all his loony radio signals, Savage enjoys the paradox that "men being executed want to become one with the wall they're put up in front of—to lose themselves in the stone—to become solid, permanent, to endure, in other words, to live, to be alive."¹¹ That is, to him life lies in the inanimate and insentient.

Savage even has his own version of the mind-body split. In a commercial he wrote, a Hessian horseman holds his aching head under his arm but finds relief in Extra Strength Excedrin. Unfortunately, “if he gets a backache, he can’t find relief, not being attached to the head.” The agency’s rejection—“Too Cartesian”—“unhinged” Savage.¹² He became the shattered mind that suffered the shock therapy depicted in *The Journey*. If this life is a journey it’s a lunatic trip, through foggy chills.

And Absurd irruptions. In another of Savage’s rejected ads—for “Volkswagen—for the man with special taste”—a man spurns eight whores in a brothel to have sex with an umbrella. The image equates whore and umbrella as shelters from inclemency. Savage’s Ph.D. thesis—“the Positive Results of the Triangular Tension between Goethe, Schopenhauer and Schopenhauer’s Mother”—yokes scholarly logic and twisted sexuality. Savage—however helpful his nature and refreshing his ad copy—is a homicidal psychopath. Yet his ex-girlfriend Henrietta’s disorder “might charitably be characterized as thermonuclear masochism.” That is, even the murderous madman has a place in our ostensibly rational civilization. All Savage remembers of his marriage is his wife “forever dialing 911”—the modern sensibility’s cry for help or version of Munch’s *Scream*. Yet his “unstructured madness” bolsters Jim’s impotent “craftsmanship” to make them “a good team.”¹³

With his allegorical surname, ominous intuitions, and climactic salvation, Fred Savage might be read as an Id figure, perhaps a projection of Jim’s guilt (though Barbara sees and converses with him). He seems to spring out of Jim’s troubled mind as fortuitously as Bruno crossed Guy’s path. So, too, Savage articulates Jim’s sexual dissatisfaction with wife Lola despite his denials. Unlike characters of normal motivation, Savage responds to unheard signals, whether from his dog or from the Empire State Building, including his orders to burn down the ad agency that fired him and his permission to kill Barbara. Unlike characters with their own promptings, Savage serves an outside script.

This possibility is amplified in “Old Saybrook.” Two couples we assumed were real are revealed to be dramatic inventions who—like Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels) in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*—have escaped their playwright. They left their maker tied and gagged because he was unable to resolve their romantic tangles. As Allen’s film blends fiction and theology, the characters reject their maker when he fails to solve their problems. This confusion between art and life follows Fred Savage’s charge that, by stealing his plot, Jim “stole my life.” In a similar continuity, the blackmailed screenwriter Jim is succeeded by the captive playwright. Max Krolian seems but a name in the back story until he breaks into the action as a kind of incapacitated *deus ex machina*.

Allen has played with the dramatic continuity between life and art at least since *Bananas* (1971), where the hero's wedding night intimacies were telecast by *Wide World of Sports*, with Howard Cosell calling the plays. In Allen's short story, "The Kugelmass Episode" (1977), a modern professor enters Madame Bovary's life and brings her into his world. Here the shift from theatre-as-life to theatre-as-product provides the play's first joke. "I hate Russian plays," Jenny opines, "Nothing happens and they charge the same price as a musical." Her first objection deals with the play's content, her second with its external nature. More lightly, David claims the doorbell made Tiger Woods miss his putt on TV.¹⁴ Life and art are continuous here. Typically, even Allen's throwaway gags spark to their context. To lightly introduce the theme, the ATC production sampled Jerome Kern's *Make Believe* as the curtain rose.

Sheila and Norman Pollack have her sister Jenny and husband David over to their country home for a barbecue. They are interrupted by Hal and Sandy Maxwell who want to see their old home, which they sold to "Max Krolian, a fairly well-known writer." Hal quickly becomes prickly. He's disturbed that an amoeba-shaped pool ("Those little germs . . .") has replaced the old maple tree under which he and Sandy were married. A "smoother" finish has replaced the lost "random planking" on the floor on which he and Sandy first made their impetuous love.¹⁵ A random planking indeed.¹⁶

The peace is destroyed when Hal shows Sheila the secret safe behind the fireplace, where she finds Norman's diary of his affair with her sister. Hal pretends to literary interest when he grabs for Norman's lurid confession, though diaries are "very useful for tax purposes." Under Hal's prod, Norman explains that Jenny seduced him by changing into a thong. "Will you butt out," Sandy aptly orders her husband. "I'm trying to follow the narrative," he explains, as if he were reading a story not party to a crumbling marriage. "Can I help it if I'm an inadvertent participant in this all-too-human drama?"¹⁷

That metaphor turns literal. Just as David prepares to kill everyone with his shotgun, the playwright stumbles down the stairs from the attic/heaven: "These wild animals—I created them—then they turned on me."¹⁸ That is, the first two couples we met are fictitious creatures, while Hal and Sandy are "real." The latter's "random planking" connotes their independent will, in contrast to the others' scriptedness and smoother surface. When the "real" Hal is drawn to Norman's lurid diary, he is indeed attracted to fiction.

When Max couldn't finish his play, he threw it in the drawer. David's "It's dark in the drawer. . . . I hated the goddamned drawer," recalls the inner film characters' frustrations with their script in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and the more real Cecilia's with her far bleaker life. True to form, the adulterous Jenny "got the idea we push it open and escape into the world." The characters "hoped we could figure out some way to finish his third act," Sheila explains. They take their life

into their own hands, but prove helpless. Norman's desire—"So we could have a life every night in theatres—forever"—expresses Allen's familiar hope to find immortality through art (though he prefers to find it by not dying). It also echoes the *Cairo* film audience's yearning for the security of formula fiction, which is shared by the simpler film characters who resent the paralysis caused by Baxter's escape. But here, paradoxically, it is the playwright who claims to be "written out," as the Maker—both excluded and exhausted—is in an indulgent, amoral society.¹⁹ The "written out" playwright signifies the death of God, with both the faithful and the divinity too exhausted to sustain Him.

Max scripted the characters' adulteries to enliven their prosaic lives, especially given their stereotypically dull professions. As Norman reminds his wife, he is "not a perverted dentist. I'm a perverted orthodontist—you never got that straight." His function is as a cosmetic straightener, not to fill others' cavities. Whichever, in his wild pragmatism, he had sex with Jenny four times on President's Day "because Washington and Lincoln's birthdays are celebrated together."²⁰ In that explanation clearly the wrong union is celebrated.

David is a plastic surgeon "who streamlines rear ends."²¹ Where Norman escapes into adultery David is a sport spectator. As Jenny summarizes him, "In the winter it's the Knicks, in the summer it's golf—talk about Freud—he loves to watch young men put balls into holes. [*She goes*]."²² The exit line reflects her affair with Norman. David "can't watch Tiger Woods without pistachio nuts": "Cashews are basketball. Pistachios are golf."²³ Nuts and balls go together for the self-unaware David. Hence, too, his obtuseness: "DAVID: Do you play golf? / HAL: No. / DAVID: Um, terrific. We must play sometime."²⁴ David takes three pages to "get" the implications of Norman's diary and the photo of Norman with his tongue in Jenny's ear and his hands on her breasts: "Hmmm—Norman, is this some new dental procedure?" His realization seems to come as an elision in language rather than a perception: "So what is your point? That the woman in the diary—in the photo—resembles Jenny? That the woman resembles Jenny? That the woman resembles Jenny? That the woman resembles Jenny? That the woman—that the woman's Jenny—it's Jenny—I got it—I got it." Even that insight he immediately loses: "NORMAN: I've been having an affair with Jenny. / DAVID: Jenny—a woman with the same name as my wife! / SHEILA: The trauma's too much."²⁵

In their negative attraction, the adulterers lack any harmony. Asked how long they had their affair, Norman and Jenny simultaneously reply "Not long" and "Three years," then "Six months" and "A year," then "And a half" and "Not long," as Jenny finds Norman's initial position. "There was a lot of downtime," he explains ambiguously. When Jenny claims "we fell in love," he says, "It wasn't love, it was pure sex."²⁶

Like the fictional characters, the "real" accountant Hal fancies that he has transcended his profession. He has written sonnets "about the dangers of

cholesterol,” and he designed and built a birdhouse “Based on the Guggenheim.” The latter suggests the comic irrelevance of art to life. So, too, on that lightning-lit night of “random planking,” his and Sandy’s spontaneity transcended their respective marriages. As Sheila admits, “accountants can be poetic. You should see some of our tax returns.”²⁷ Hal finally gets to write his play in the scene he is living, when he draws on his own experience of dwindling marital desire to inspire Max.

In fact, all these professions are cosmetic. Jenny’s “lingerie shop in Manhattan” exploits disguise and vanity like her husband’s plastic surgery. But then, on the subject of adult responsibility Allen has shown face preferred over fate. The characters’ work and ardor conceal two levels of terror. One is domestic, the lover’s betrayal. When Sheila reels from her husband’s infidelity, Hal doesn’t “see what the big deal is here. Everybody in suburbia cheats.” Despite their initial denials, even Hal and Sandy admit to adulteries. The real characters prove as false as the fictitious. Hal, as ever drawn to fiction, was seduced by the actress Holly Fox. Sandy’s real estate agent Howard Nadelman “knows how to make a woman feel her sexuality.” Preferring to deny his wife’s appeal to other men, Hal thinks Nadelman may have been “getting even with [Hal] for the audit.”²⁸

Beyond the cosmetic of romantic insecurity lies the cosmic. For playwright Max, love’s belabored loss is only “one of the sad truths of existence. Nothing in this world is permanent. Even the characters created by the great Shakespeare will, in millions of years, cease to exist—when the universe runs its course and the lights go out.”²⁹ So much for Norman’s desire for “a life every night in theatres—forever.” Instead, we get shades of little Alvy Singer over his quavering blood-red tomato soup, refusing to do his homework because the universe is going to end.

The characters’ trivial pursuits—David’s sports, the others’ adulteries—are attempts to avoid facing not just their own but the universe’s mortality. “Jesus,” says David, “I think I’ll just go back and watch Tiger Woods. The hell with it all.” Norman agrees: “What’s it all mean if the cosmos breaks apart and everything finally vanishes?” For Jenny, “That’s why it’s important to be held and squeezed now—by anyone willing to do the squeezing.” Jenny spells out the earlier play’s notion of sex with/as an umbrella, a small shelter against the cosmic storm. But Sheila objects: “Don’t try to justify screwing my husband on existential grounds.”³⁰ Allen replays the moral dilemma of *Manhattan*. Should the futility and insignificance of our lives in the doomed cosmos justify or discourage our self-indulgence?

Of course, as God is made in man’s image (or possibly vice versa), here the maker shares his characters’ weaknesses. Playwright Max bought the house “to live alone and keep out of the rat race of romantic relationships. I was having an affair with my wife’s mother”—rather trumping Norman’s with his wife’s sister. Max couldn’t write his drama into his play because his wife’s father was himself already a figure of fiction—“a well-known film star”—who left his wife for an

au pair girl and who “was a shoe fetishist who could only get aroused if Prada was having a sale.”³¹ The latter detail is transformed into Jenny seducing Norman in her lingerie shop changing room. The mother’s incriminating diary becomes Norman’s. At another remove, Max’s domestic snarl recalls the public scandal when Allen betrayed his former partner Mia Farrow with her adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Previn, whom he later married. For Max as for Allen, art transforms the materials of the writer’s life.

Where the first play echoed Hitchcock, this one evokes Allen’s personal film world. Sandy has the befuddlement and nervous naivety of Sandy Dennis’s character in Allen’s *Another Woman* (1988) and her persona-defining role as Honey in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols 1966). When Sheila confronts Norman, Sandy edges away: “Well, it was nice meeting you. . . . We’ll just let ourselves out. . . . We love what you’ve done with the place. . . . If you’re ever in Nutley.”³² Similarly, Norman *Pollack* may recall Sidney Pollack, the director friend Allen cast as a vulgar adulterer in *Husbands and Wives* (1992). More importantly, the playwright is given the “Max” that Allen and buddy Tony Roberts call each other in *Annie Hall*, revived as Roberts’s hedonistic Dr. Maxwell Jordan in *A Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy* (1982). The name confirms Max Krolian as Allen’s playful surrogate.

To this Max falls the play’s—and the trilogy’s—apparent moral: “Everybody has their dark secrets, their longing, their lusts, their awful needs—so if life is to continue one must choose to forgive.” But Allen undercuts this message in two ways. First, his characters hijack this spirit as a license to indulge. They use forgiveness like the corrupt medieval church’s pardons. For the real Sandy, however, “how is forgiveness different than just sweeping all your problems under the rug?” Second, after Sandy’s remark, Max’s ostensible morality proves false: “Forgiveness—it gives this little sex farce dimension and heart. . . . It’s much grander—it takes a bigger person—forgiveness is divine. . . . I like it—it’s funny, it’s sad, and best of all, it’s commercial. Come—let’s go to my study so I can complete the third act while it’s all fresh—I feel my writer’s block lifting. The key word is ‘commercial’—I’m sorry, ‘forgiveness’—the key word is ‘forgiveness.’”³³

After Max takes his characters off, the real Hal and Sandy remain behind, unable to forgive each other. Though Max seems right—“he’s a deep playwright . . . a clever craftsman”—they are too disillusioned to forgive each other. Instead, because of their mutual need, they take another solution from fiction—they will begin anew. That is, the real characters pretend to start a new relationship. They agree to live a shared fiction. “Clean starts work better in fiction,” Sandy contends, and Hal agrees, “[E]very life needs a little fiction in it—too much reality is a very nasty thing.”³⁴ The play opens with the noise of migrating geese.

If their observation evokes “the tragic heroine of a Russian play,” the image also evokes Tony Soprano’s (James Gandolfini) disturbance by the departure of the ducks

who settled into his pool and then left him.³⁵ In Allen's play, all three men reveal, but also serve, themselves in how they read those geese. To the cynical Norman, the geese "symbolize impending disaster—the honking is a mating call and a mating call always spells trouble." David reads in them "the inscrutable magnificence of nature," specifically the lesson "That one day we all must grow old and decay." But that bleak message is professionally heartening to the plastic surgeon. When accountant Hal frees his inner poet, the honking geese signify "a fresh start—of geese where geese never were. . . . We were looking for some sign—some way to recapture the music in our relationship and then—the honking of the geese." Hal imputes a more hopeful model to nature: "Geese mate forever." And if they have affairs, "they work it out somehow—it's all in nature's design." The play fades out on the couple's kiss, "*Sound of geese honking, and music rises.*"³⁶

As usual Allen presents a world bereft of any absolutes, with only compelling human needs and the aesthetic/anesthetic artifices of fiction to provide our balm and direction. The real couple's last kiss dramatizes the fictitious Jenny's need for a loving embrace—a kind of umbrella—in the face of our cosmic nothingness. Like a writer, Hal imposes on the geese the meaning he wants. His "nature's design" is his invention. In the final sound, the cacophony of the geese's honking is overwritten by an artifice, man's music. Art overwrites nature when it imposes the artist's need.

Still, the writer has broken through his block. When Max resumes his play, Allen ends the writer's block through an insight that reconciles the lofty impulse—forgiveness—with the base—the commercial. In that light, the play recalls his *Stardust Memories* (1980) and its model, Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963). Perhaps even the name "Old Saybrook" may be allegorical—like the Porlock whose emissary reputedly stanch Coleridge's flow of "Kubla Khan." Here the writer can now pronounce the links or flow, where he had been dammed to blockage before.

In "Central Park West," Phyllis Riggs, a neurotic psychoanalyst, discovers her husband Sam has been having an affair with her friend Carol, who in turn discovers that Sam is leaving Phyllis—but plans instead to marry 21-year-old Juliet, who is herself drawn away by Carol's husband, Howard. As cruel fate would have it, Carol tells Howard of her adultery on the day he puts his dilapidated old dad into a home.

The trilogy's finale amplifies the characters' civilization. Phyllis's affluent home/office is described as "spacious with dark woods and books"—an implicit metaphor for the intellectuals' jungle that Phyllis to the end denies: "All right—knock it off—we're not in the jungle—this is Central Park West."³⁷ The November setting extends the first play's dank chill.

This third circus of betrayals is the most piquant because its arena is psychotherapy. References to therapy increase across the trilogy. In the first play, when the psychiatrist told Jim to stop seeing Barbara, Jim did stop seeing—the psychiatrist.³⁸ In the second, Sheila reminds us that “Freud said there are no jokes,” and Norman toasts him as “the poet of penis envy.” Hal repeats Sheila’s line. The fictitious (!) Dr. Fineglass is the real Sandy’s cover for her therapeutic thrice weekly trysts with Nadelman: “Didn’t you think it was strange I had the only shrink who didn’t take August off?”³⁹

In the finale, psychotherapy is the setting for betrayal and self-destruction. Phyllis is indignant about another of Sam’s affairs: “Nancy Rice is on the ethics committee! . . . Nancy Rice is chairwoman of the ethics committee at the hospital—her specialty is moral choice.”⁴⁰ Again, the heart overrules the mind; the body pursues its pleasures as if headless. But as Fred Savage’s rejected ad reminded us, the body can’t be healed when it’s separated from its head.

Phyllis finds herself “the ironic shrink who could see everybody’s problems but her own.” To her literate credit, the shrink is both ironic herself and caught in the irony of a betrayal beyond her awareness. In Phyllis’s ultimate irony, Sam’s Juliet was her patient, who came to her “a year ago—introverted, confused, anorexic—petrified of men. My goal was to liberate her so she could emerge as a woman and function.”⁴¹ Phyllis is the shrink hoist on her own efficacy.

Though she has left Carol “this frantic, desperate message—emergency, crisis—help,” Phyllis refuses to speak to her: “No details, please . . . I *said* let’s not get into it. . . . No details, please. . . . Can we not discuss it? . . . Can’t you see I’m being evasive? . . . Look how she probes.”⁴² This melodramatic ploy recalls Helen Sinclair’s (Dianne Wiest) “Say no more” to her young playwright lover (John Cusack) in *Bullets Over Broadway*. But here the therapist’s reticence jars against her profession of confession.

Phyllis is also undercut by the resonance of metaphor that she craves: “It’s such a curse to be literal. A waste of wit—all my jokes and little ironies go straight down the toilet.” Her joke—“What’s the difference between sushi and pussy?” (Answer: rice)—suggests a male sexism that reduces her to a consumable. So, too, Phyllis charges Carol with a more commonly male image of randiness: “I knew all the time you’d fuck a snake if they held its head.”⁴³

Sam first importuned Carol when “Howard was in the kitchen getting the Steins’ recipe for baba ganoush.” As if to excuse the infidelity, the cuckold is feminized. Later, he impotently offers to prepare the dish to cool everyone down.⁴⁴ Still, Howard’s baba ganoush is a considerable step up on “Saybrook” Jenny’s making ice, “one of the only things I learned in cooking school.”⁴⁵ In another continuity, Sam’s ploy with Carol was the same as Norman’s with Jenny: they pretend to buy a present for the wife.

Ever analytical, Phyllis reads Carol's phone ring as "tremulous and tentative," projecting onto it/her a naiveté and vulnerability at first belied by Carol's betrayal, then confirmed by Sam's preference for Juliet. When the raging Phyllis breaks the penis off her fertility statue, she handles it coolly: "That's OK—I'll just bring it to my penis repairman." Later, "A stiff prick knows no conscience." Her imagery confirms Howard's diagnosis: "I think the problem is Phyllis can be castrating." She proves more subtly devastating in her sympathetic response to Carol's nausea: "I may have some Compazine suppositories, but I'm not sure I have extra-large."⁴⁶ Phyllis already suspects Carol when she calls her.

As a therapist, Phyllis is the most articulate about marital malaise: "He doesn't love me. . . . It gives him the dry heaves to imagine himself going through the joyless choreography of sex with me anymore. Those are the vague reasons he gives, but I think he's just being polite." As she realizes now, when they communicated, "there were two speakers but no listeners."⁴⁷ Nor does she pick up on Carol's incriminating nervousness: "I have to sit down—my legs are weak But he didn't say where he was going? . . . Did he say who he was leaving you for? . . . You know, I really don't feel well."⁴⁸

Despite its drawing room realism, the play resumes Allen's theme of fictionalizing life. At first, Howard is surprised at Carol's affair: "You never had a good word to say about Sam." Then Carol calls him "a failed writer, Howard—judging from the characters you create you shouldn't even be a writer—you should be in the cardboard business." Reversing her charge, Howard claims that Carol tries to make a fiction of herself. That explains her affair: she was so "obsessed with everything about Phyllis" that she tried to remake herself like her, down to taking her husband. Howard declares Carol a rewritten fiction: "Carole's always had an identity problem. She doesn't know who she is. Or rather, she knows who she is and she's desperately trying to find someone else to be—and who can blame her? . . . At least I have an identity. I'm Howard who's manic-depressive. Carol wants to be you, but you're already taken—."⁴⁹

Again the characters' romantic illusions draw on Hollywood, though bathetically. Phyllis says Carol "dove for [her cell phone] like you were going down on Cary Grant." Less romantically, Howard describes Carol's rejected baby as "quite cute considering he resembled the movie actor Broderick Crawford." Phyllis translates Carol's passion with Sam—"it's like lightning—two people meet—a spark flares up and suddenly there's a life of its own"—into B-Hollywood horror: "You're describing Frankenstein." When Sam rejects Carol, Phyllis exults as Blanche du Bois: "Sometimes there's God so quickly."⁵⁰ In a drama about fictionalized selves the characters draw their language from film and theatre.

So alluring is fiction that Phyllis says Carol lusts for Sam "because he works for a show business law firm." (She shares Hal's denial of the spouse's own attractiveness.) Howard lures away Juliet, a would-be film editor, with promises

of a Hollywood connection, despite his awareness of that folly in Sam: “Marriage is a huge step for anyone—much less a kid like you [Juliet] and a screwed up middle-aged Casanova.” Juliet accepts Howard’s story even though he can’t keep it straight, claiming first MGM then Paramount as his offer, and he improbably declares Warren Beatty “a very dear friend of mine. Not that we’ve spent a lot of time together, but we met at a political rally.”⁵¹ Howard and Juliet eagerly bypass their skepticism for delusion.

To Sam, Howard has lost any “shred of credibility.” “He’s a cartoon.” But Sam seems to project himself into his summary of Howard’s novel:

Instantly remaindered. A thinly disguised novel about an ex-college athlete who’s competitive with a brilliant, foul-mouthed wife who heads the department of a hospital and writes books and is the center of attention wherever they go and who never realizes he’s weak and she is inadvertently emasculating the poor bastard so all he lives for is illicit sex.

“With the physically and mentally handicapped,” adds Sam’s understanding wife.⁵²

Indeed, as the geese in the second play evoke Tony Soprano’s comforting, discomfiting ducks, Sam’s affair with Juliet recalls Tony’s affair with Gloria (Annabella Sciorra), whom he meets in Dr. Mefli’s (Lorraine Bracco) waiting room (season III, episode 8). Phyllis’s therapy also resembles Melfi’s, as Juliet suggests: “It’s terrible because I hate to lose you as an analyst. On the other hand, you always tried to guide me to act in my own best interests.”⁵³

On that principle Sam has also been sleeping with Mrs. Bucksbaum, the crippled lady on the second floor. Yet he claims he wants commitment: “I can’t go on like this—I want something stable for once—I have to bring some sanity to my life. Juliet, you’re everything I ever dreamed of.”⁵⁴ Clearly he is imposing those qualities upon the troubled girl. Of course, he is deluded by his own vanity, lust, and the subliminal power of her literary name.

The play and the trilogy end with a telling combination of filmic consolation and incontrovertible reality. “We’re going home,” Carol commands Howard, “The Movie Channel is showing *The Island of Lost Souls*. I want to see if our names come up.” As Juliet returns to Phyllis’s therapy and ignores Sam’s begging, the psychoanalyst’s dubious authority is restored. Against the fading lights, Phyllis declares, “Grow up, Sam—she shot you in the ass—it’s called rejection!”⁵⁵ Some visceral truths even the dream factory can’t assuage.

The trilogy develops several continuing motifs. Scriptwriter Jim leads into playwright Max and pretentious Howard. Like Fred Savage's creative impulses and the lunatic Max, Carol bets "wrong that all [Howard's] mental instability was a sure sign of literary genius when in fact it was just plain dementia."⁵⁶ Savage's shock therapy returns to sustain Howard but in the middle play is supplanted by Pirandello existentialism.

When Howard remembers that his debilitated but once "strapping, virile" father "took me to ball games," he slips into Jenny's target, David, who measures out his life in ball games and their attendant nuts.⁵⁷ Howard's competition with Sam at racquetball, then for Juliet, provokes Carol's last cut at her chef husband: "You got enough nutmeg to last a lifetime."⁵⁸ Carol's image draws its sexual dismissal from Jenny's summary of her David's nuts and balls.

In all three plays, the adulterers are so weak they leave their confessions to third parties. Savage informs Barbara of Jim's intention to dump her, Sheila tells David of Jenny's affair, and Phyllis tells Howard about Carol's. Expanding upon the "perverted orthodontist" Norman, when Carol had an affair with her dentist, he "charged me for an extra filling." Like Sheila, Phyllis suspects Sam of sleeping with her sister Susan. Norman's incriminating diary derives from Max's mother-in-law's, then leads to Sam's Filofax. Sam, like Norman, denies having admitted "love" to his lover. If Phyllis warns, "Never fuck a lawyer, they get you on the terminology,"⁵⁹ dentists know that drill, too.

In the finale Carol revives playwright Max's plea for forgiveness: "Because we're human beings, Howard—fallible and often stupid but not evil—not really—just pathetic—mistaken—desperate. . . . Howard—this is not the cosmos—this is Central Park West!"⁶⁰ Even in the first play, Jim and Savage forgive each other their transgressions, blackmail and plagiarism, respectively: Jim out of need and Savage out of madness. Barbara is doomed because she won't forgive. What we reject as Max's commercial strategy to finish a play, we can accept in life.

Allen's third play resumes the implicit reference to Chekhov in the opening of the second. The first line, "Look, Norman, the geese are back," is "Spoken like the tragic heroine of a Russian play."⁶¹ As Chekhov is also known to have prescribed, a gun planted in Act One must go off in Act Three. David's rifle in the second play leads—suitably shrunk—to Howard's Luger in the third. Before he could fire, David was interrupted by playwright Max. Like Mickey's (Allen) in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), Howard's suicide attempt fails: "It's a German Luger—it should be like a Mercedes!"⁶² Typically, Howard blames the gun for his failure to release the safety catch. The Luger finally fires when the flustered Juliet shoots Sam in the rear (realizing the "Butt out" lines in the last two plays).

To Juliet's "I didn't mean it—it was an accident," Phyllis replies, "There are no accidents, baby. You still need me to tell you that? Now go home and stay home.

We'll discuss this Monday.”⁶³ Now that Juliet has rejected Sam, Phyllis reclaims Juliet as her patient. To save her from the Law, Phyllis sends her home. As all these victims close forces, the initial form of their relationships is restored. “There are no accidents” replays the second play’s “There are no jokes.”

Allen’s three one-act plays are so continuous in theme and in imagery that they can be considered a single work in three parts. Individually and as a unit, they depict our sad attempts to find a personal refuge from the impermanence not just of the cosmos but of emotional commitment. The trilogy exercises the saving grace of art even as it reconfirms its futility.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all citations for the three plays—“Riverside Drive,” “Old Saybrook,” and “Central Park West”—are from Woody Allen, *Three One-act Plays* (New York: Random House, 2003); here 14.

2. “Riverside Drive” 3.

3. 12. In the Atlantic production, Skipp Sudduth played Savage; Paul Reiser, Jim; and Kate Blumberg, Barbara.

4. 3.

5. 22, 27, 46, and 45.

6. 52.

7. 59.

8. 60-2 and 69.

9. 70.

10. 19.

11. 10.

12. 11 and 20.

13. 26, 40, and 62-63.

14. “Old Saybrook” 73 and 79.

15. 77-81.

16. In the ATC premiere, Bebe Neuwirth played Sheila; Jay Thomas, Norman; Heather Burns, Jenny; Grant Shaud, David; Christopher Evan Welch, Hal; Clea Lewis, Sandy; and Richard Portnow, Max.

17. 89 and 94.

18. 107.

19. 109 and 111.

20. 96 and 90.

21. 83.

22. 80.

23. 75.

24. 83, 80, 75, and 80.

25. 100-101
26. 92-3.
27. 82, 84, and 82.
28. 83, 90, 118, and 124.
29. 112.
30. 112-3.
31. 115-6.
32. 85-7.
33. 122-3.
34. 123.
35. 73. Richard Portnow, who played Max in the ATC production, appears in *The Sopranos* as Tony's lawyer, Malvoin.
36. 76, 74, and 126.
37. "Central Park West" 210.
38. "Riverside Drive" 37.
39. "Old Saybrook" 74, 75, 115, and 120.
40. "Central Park West" 192-3.
41. 159 and 200.
42. 130, 134, 136, and 137.
43. 131 and 154.
44. 155 and 197.
45. "Old Saybrook" 75.
46. "Central Park West" 135, 138, 192, 194, and 148.
47. 141-2.
48. 141, 144, 146, and 147
49. 164, 165, and 167-8.
50. 149, 172, 152, and 188.
51. 157, 205, and 209. The Beatty allusion has an additional spin for Allen. Diane Keaton lived with Beatty after leaving Allen. The real-life witnesses in Allen's *Zelig* (1983) and the therapist's pursuit of her lover/patient to Europe are both parodic references to Beatty's film, *Reds* (1981). The title of Allen's first film-script, *What's New, Pussycat?* (1965), was a Beatty greeting.
52. 207-8.
53. 202.
54. 202.
55. 212 and 213.
56. 174.
57. 161.
58. 195, 207, and 213.
59. 173, 183, and 195.
60. 177.

61. "Old Saybrook 73.
62. "Central Park West" 178.
63. 212.