

Broadway Danny Rose (1984)

“I thought this was a funny story...”

Major credits:

Writer and Director: Woody Allen

Cinematographer: Gordon Willis

Editor: Susan E. Morse

Music: Dick Hyman

Cast: Woody Allen (Danny Rose), Mia Farrow (Tina Vitale), Nick Apollo Forte (Lou Canova), Sandy Baron (Himself)

Background and Commentary

Broadway Danny Rose serves as a fine example of a “small” film nearly perfectly executed. Allen himself acknowledges to his biographer, Eric Lax, that it stems from “a little idea,” but the movie's limited artistic ambition should not conceal the virtuosity of its comical set pieces (the helium-inflected shootout, for example), verbal wit, and, ultimately, ethical concerns. Perhaps it is best understood as a folktale for the modern world. Like Isaac Bashevis Singer's celebrated short story, “Gimpel the Fool,” the eponymous protagonist appears at first to be a *shlimazel*, a hapless victim of his own naïve faith, who is ultimately revealed to be a kind of saint.

The character of Danny Rose is loosely based on Allen's longtime agent, Jack Rollins. Nick Apollo Forte was an obscure lounge pianist who had never before appeared in a film—and never did again. This was the almost unrecognizable Mia Farrow's third collaboration with Allen, following *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* and *Zelig*. The Carnegie Deli on 55th Street remains a favorite tourist stop and proudly honors its little place in movie history.

Cinematic Elements:

- Black-and white cinematography: Gordon Willis, Allen's favorite cinematographer during this period, again shoots the film in black-and-white but with none of the grandiosity of *Manhattan* (1979). Many of the indoor sequences seem ordinary enough, but the subtle gray scale of the shots on the water or the luminosity of the night scenes attest to Willis' extraordinary work.
- Close-up: as in the closing shot of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), Allen relies on the expressiveness of Mia Farrow's face in the privileged shot as she gazes into the mirror, the only moment in the film when she is not wearing sunglasses.
- Music: Dick Hyman was Allen's musical director for the great films of the 1980s. Here the jaunty score of Italian pop tunes manages to synthesize ethnic spirit with kitsch, which makes Lou's moving rendition of “La Bambina” at the Waldorf all the more surprising.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does the narrative frame—“the greatest Danny Rose story” told at the Carnegie Deli—add to our experience of the film? Put another way, what would be lost if the film was not a flashback but simply began and ended with Danny himself? (Note that the events being recounted took place around 1969—there's a reference to the moon landing and also to North Vietnam.)
2. Some critics have lamented the film's happy ending, which could be compared to Alvy Singer's first play in *Annie Hall*, where everything works out “perfect” in art because it never does in life. Is the film sentimental (to a fault)?

3. At the same time that Danny's ethos (“It's important to feel guilty”) seems to echo Isaac's speech to Yale in *Manhattan* (“You're too easy on yourself!”), the film anticipates the melodramatic exploration of guilt in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Note the

consequence of Danny's "naming names"—exactly the sin that Isaac held up as an example to Yale—when he is cornered in the warehouse. Is Danny's saintly status compromised by his "betrayal" of Barney Dunn? Does this unpretentious comedy actually express an Old Testament morality?