

Cultural Daily

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Woody Allen ‘En Pleine Forme’ — with *Magic in the Moonlight*

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, July 23rd, 2014

The French Riviera, the roaring twenties, acerbic Colin Firth paired with positively ‘glistening-in-the-spotlight’ Emma Stone — ooo-la-la, what’s not to like?! Everything in this briskly paced, ontological romantic comedy shines. Woody Allen’s *Magic in the Moonlight* is as close to perfection as the director has ever come.

Colin Firth plays world-renowned Chinese magician, Wei Ling Soo, the premiere illusionist of his time – who also happens to be an arrogant, militant skeptic and an atheist who rejects the possibility of an afterlife — i.e. Allen’s spiritual surrogate. Wei Ling’s true identity, Stanley Crawford of Westminster, has long remained a mystery to his fans, and so he is approached by his life-long friend and rival, magician Howard Burkan (Simon McBurney), who enlists his support in anonymously exposing a charismatic young spiritual medium as a fraud. The girl in question, Sophie (Emma Stone) and her shrewd mother (Marcia Gay Harden) have taken up residence as guests of the wealthy, susceptible Catledge widow (Jacki Weaver) and her scion son (Hamish Linklater) in their opulent Côte d’Azur estate. Stanley readily accepts Howard’s challenge, brazenly trumpeting his contempt for all things supernatural: “It’s all phony, from the séance to the Vatican and beyond.” He forgoes his vacation with his fiancée among the giant Galapagos turtles and sets off instead for the south of France with his friend on a befuddling adventure.

Allen has long held a fascination for magic. As a teen, he performed tricks as a magician for captive audiences. Hypnotists, healers, and fortune tellers have figured prominently in so many of his films, including *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), *Alice* (1990), and *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001). The plots of *Zelig* (1983), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), and *Midnight in Paris* (2011) moreover share fantastic and whimsical premises. Film itself is among the greatest of magical illusions, so it is natural that Allen would be attracted to telling a story with a magician at its core.



Hamish Linklater (Brice), Emma Stone (Sophie), Colin Firth (Stanley), and Jacki Weaver (Grace), “Magic in the Moonlight.” Photo by Jack English © 2014 Gravier Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Spiritual mediums were the rage during the 1920’s, and in an era before television, séances were a common form of popular entertainment. The Great Harry Houdini purportedly attended numerous séances in his day out of his sincere longing to discover proof that communicating with the dead was indeed possible. To his profound regret, he succeeded at debunking every clairvoyant he ever encountered. Before he died, Houdini even went so far as to make a pact with his wife, that were

he to find it possible to communicate with her from beyond the grave, he would send her a message — a promise which his widow later admitted he never succeeded in fulfilling.

Using magic as a pretext, Allen herein sets into motion an epistemological debate about nothing less than the truth of existence — which gives this particular romantic comedy a heft that is at once refreshing and exceedingly rare. On one end of the spectrum is rational Stanley who refuses to succumb to magical thinking, and at the other extreme are the Catledges, eager to embrace supernatural truths. Stanley's mentor and confidant Aunt Vanessa is comfortable with ambiguity and accepts the limitations of knowledge in a world of mystery. Allen even scripts a psychiatrist in-law into the mix: "I wanted to have someone there from the sciences because the scientific community is always befuddled by these kinds of people. You would think they wouldn't be, but in real life, it's quite the opposite," he explains. In our current age of anxiety and country swept up in a tide of renewed religious fundamentalism on the one end, and new-age spirituality on the other, Allen's playful thesis has deep, subversive stakes. As Stanley contemplates, "Am I the only sane person left on this planet?"

While actor Colin Firth judges Aunt Vanessa to be the wisest character in the story: "She knows that real foolishness comes from being too certain of everything," he defends, would Allen agree? I am inclined to think not. In this, the third act of his career (and life), I imagine that Allen is wondering if he will have the fortitude to hold fast to his professed beliefs even until the bitter end, and he forces us to closely examine our own deepest convictions. All of which makes for a very "adult" and provocative romantic comedy, indeed.



Hamish Linklater (Brice) and Emma Stone (Sophie), *"Magic in the Moonlight."*

Photo by Jack English © 2014 Gravier Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

The real magic, the genuine magic in which Allen has always placed his faith, of course, is the magic of falling in love. "Seeing someone and being instantly attracted to them is an unexplainable thing ... You can try to give reasons for it, but in the end, you never really know what it is," concedes Allen. "I am sure a million years from now, with computers, they will be able to mathematically graph what is going on, but for now and the foreseeable future, there is no proof it will ever change," he laments.

In *Magic in the Moonlight*, Allen sets the stage for romance summoning all the powers at his disposal as a director of cinema. These resplendent Riviera locations are photographed to perfection by Director of Photography Darius Khondji (*Midnight in Paris*, *To Rome with Love*). Khondji used Cinemascope lenses from the seventies, lowering the contrast and softening the images in the processing, while color supervisor Pascal Dangin artfully renders it all with an "autochrome" period-effect. Costume designer Sonia Grande and her team painstakingly combed for original clothes from the period, outfitting 'believers' in whites and pastels and 'skeptics' in darker hues. On top of all of this, Khondji bathes ingénue Emma Stone in an especially radiant light. "He basically put me in a white box of light," she recounts. "I felt she had a natural glow — this combination of the color of her skin, hair, and eyes. But it was mainly the way she played the character that inspired me to photograph her this way," he explains. The effect is an ineffable radiance, a spectacular frame for a spectacular performance. "Emma is the sort of the person who energizes a film set. She was incredibly popular and got to know everybody," raves co-star Firth. "She has an upbeat funny nature which I felt invigorated people." Firth's sarcastic and cutting cynicism provides the perfect foil to offset and counter-balance Stone's cheerful, sunny

disposition. As we have come to expect from Allen, the film is impeccably cast throughout. Special mention goes out to the ever worldly-wise Eileen Atkins (Aunt Vanessa), the delightfully innocent Jacki Weaver (Grace), and the foppishly smitten Hamish Linklater (Brice, *The Future*).



Emma Stone (Sophie) and Colin Firth (Stanley), "Magic in the Moonlight."

Photo by Jack English © 2014 Gravier Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

The action builds to a spectacular Gatsby-esque ball, from which Stanley precipitously departs when he learns that his Aunt is in critical condition at the local hospital. As he awaits the results of her surgery, there is a scene that is destined to become a cinema classic. [No spoilers.] Firth comments, "I don't think I have ever played a protagonist in a film who gets so close to being completely unsympathetic. I'm sure the audience is rooting for him to get a pie in the face." Director Allen does satisfy these longings, with planting and payoff for a magical finish.

If you have not succumbed to Allen's creative output of the past three years (*Midnight in Paris*, *To Rome with Love*, and *Blue Jasmine*), by the closing credits of *Magic in the Moonlight*, you may find yourself swept up in the romance, seduced by the irascible Woody Allen, falling in love with his cinema art all over again. In the words of scientist-psychiatrist George (Jeremy Shamos): "Like Freud, he is not seduced by childish thoughts. He is a very unhappy man. I like him."



Emma Stone, Director Woody Allen and Colin Firth, "Magic in the Moonlight."

Photo by Jack English © 2014 Gravier Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Locations for Your Very Own "Magic in the Moonlight" Tour

Observatoire de la Côte d'Azur, Mont Gros, Nice (observatory designed by Gustave Eiffel)

Villa Eilenroc, Cap d'Antibes (Catledge Home, Ball Scene)

Villa la Renardière, Mouans-Sartoux (Catledge Home)

Hotel Belle Rives, Juan-les Pins (Bar & Restaurant)

Chateau du Rouet (Vineyard), Le Muy (Aunt Vanessa's House)

Hotel Negresco, Nice (Berlin Cabaret)

Opéra de Nice (Berlin Theatre Exterior)

Top Image: Marcia Gay Harden (Mrs. Baker) and Emma Stone (Sophie), "Magic in the Moonlight." Photo by Jack English © 2014 Gravier Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

"Magic in the Moonlight" Official Website.

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