



Woody Allen's "Irrational Man"



Woody — As far as he can see on a cloudy day, it's simply "Irrational."



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by Liz Smith

**Rationally, Woody Allen's "Irrational Man," Makes No Sense.
But, the Party Was Divine.**

"GOOD LUCK has its storms," said **George Lucas**.

WELL, depending on the critical reception of **Woody Allen**'s new movie "Irrational Man," he'll have either good luck or stormy weather. But, for the New York premiere of the film, starring **Joaquin Phoenix**, **Emma Stone** and the great **Parker Posey**, good luck prevailed. Not only was the screening auditorium at The Museum of Modern Art packed to the very last seat with the elite of Manhattan's movers and shakers, the weather cooperated with almost divine munificence. The rain stopped, the humidity dropped, the skies opened, and the after-party, in the courtyard of The New York Palace — hosted by The Cinema Society, Figi Water and Metropolitan Capital — turned into the loveliest event of the year so far.

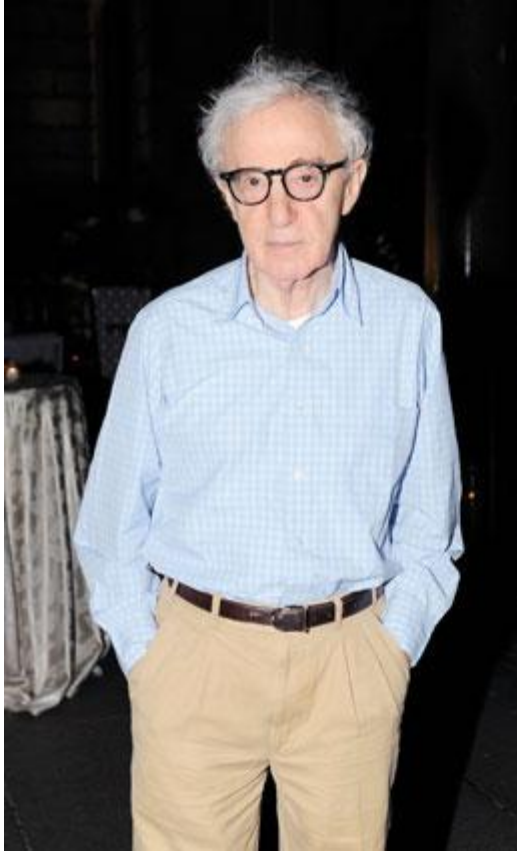


The scene of the after-party in the courtyard of The New York Palace.

THE hard-edged networking and air-kissing and leaning in to gossip over who just sat down and *what* are they wearing, which permeated the theater, seemed to melt away in the cool, cool, cool, of the evening. The dim lights, the divine music — from **Julie London** to **Peggy Lee** to big band swing to vintage **Michael Jackson** — put the entire group into mellow mood. In fact, the show biz contrast between the screening itself and after-party was a quintessential Woody Allen film itself, the varying elements of his beloved New York City. The tequila cocktails helped.



Among the crowd, director Allen, **Parker Posey**, **Sophie von Haselberg** (**Bette Midler**'s daughter and mighty appealing) ... **Anna Wintour** ... **Arianna Huffington** ... **Marlo Thomas** and **Phil Donohue** ... **Judd Hirsch** (who looks so good, and much like himself, it is startling. Sometimes unconventional looks are the most enduring) ... **Damian Lewis** the "Homeland" and "Wolf Hall" hunk, who is taller and handsomer in person ... **Tony Danza** ... fashion's **Fern Mallis** ... the famous model **Pat Cleveland**, dazzling in red, very metaphysical and writing her autobiography (but soon, she promises, a music career!) ... **Clive Davis** ... writer/director/producer **Linda Yellen** ... **Annette de la Renta** ... **Regis and Joy Philbin**. I could go on, but you get it — if the ceiling of MoMA had collapsed or the Palace courtyard given way, Manhattan would be a desolate town.



Auteur Woody Allen.



Helen McCrory and Damian Lewis.



Parker Posey and Laverne Cox.



Sophie Von Haselberg.



Pat Cleveland.

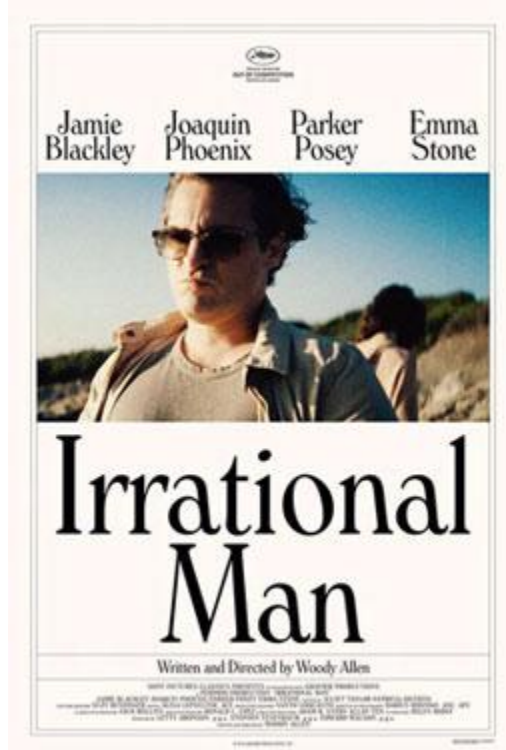
AND THIS brings us back to why all these glamorous types were gathered. (Bet you thought I'd forgotten!)

I've enjoyed many of Woody Allen's films over the decades, and in recent years I have been fascinated as he has reinvented his work in various ways — his London and European periods, intense efforts such as “Blue Jasmine,” (a direct steal from “A Streetcar Named Desire” but brilliant in many ways.) He is the definition of *auteur* and is driven to create and to put out his work with incredible regularity.

That his movies — even some of the very best — have not always resulted in besieged box-offices, hardly seems to matter to him.

“Irrational Man” will not, in our estimation stand as one of his very best. Perhaps an interesting misfire, or, to those Allen fanatics, for whom Woody can do no wrong, another unfairly disregarded classic? This one tells the story of a college professor —

Joaquin Phoenix — an existentialist — who has lost all interest in life. He drinks — a *lot* — he cannot make love, not even to such attractive women as **Parker Posey** (the dissatisfied wife of a faculty member) or **Emma Stone** (one of his students.) He's pot-bellied, depressed, a mess. Dostoevsky is often quoted.



Abe (Joaquin Phoenix) and Rita (Parker Posey).



With one of his students as played by Emma Stone.

That is, until he conceives the idea of committing a perfect murder. Perfect in execution and perfect in logic — the victim, he reasons, deserves it, the world will be better for this death. With homicide on his mind, he finds a reason to live and love and make love again. (He also dresses better; less emphasis on a quite alarming gut!)

That's the story, although more comes of the professor's "well reasoned" actions than he anticipated. (Murder, or the instability that might lead to murder, is a theme that seems to increasingly interest Woody. With that in mind, I wish this film had gone more the way of his excellent 2005 offering, "Match Point.")



Here's where things start to get distorted.

I don't know what Woody intended here. If it is supposed to be a drama, it is unintentionally snicker-inducing. If it was meant to be a comedy, it is mind-numbingly boring. I suppose this falls into the "dramedy" category. This is often treacherous territory, even for a master such as Woody Allen.

One major flaw is excruciating voiceovers by both Phoenix and Stone, over-explaining all their thoughts and actions. And as things turn out, one of those voiceovers is a rather improbable device. Maybe it's irony, but that word is now so over-used as a way to condescendingly explain/describe music, art and film to mere mortals such as myself who don't quite understand — "*It's ironic, dear!*" I'm sure some will find it a treatise on the banality of morality and the inevitability of hypocrisy. Maybe it is that. But like I said, in this incarnation, intention is opaque, if not in fact, a literal brick wall.



What I can say with assurance is that Mr. Phoenix and Miss Stone enact two of the most unlikable characters Allen has ever written. Especially, the student played by Stone — so shallow, so essentially stupid, despite pretensions of intellectualism, so deserving of what almost happens to her. Sophie von Haselberg is charming, and the film could have used more of her.



But if “Irrational Man” has any great merit, it comes in the form of Parker Posey. She is the film’s saving grace, and the only character who actually makes sense — even if it comes from an always handy cocktail glass. Posey, as she has her entire eclectic career, brings all her powers, her humor and her pathos to every scene.

Whatever the fate of “Irrational Man,” it is comforting to know, as I learned at the party, that Woody Allen is just crazy about Miss Posey (of whom he was not terribly

aware, prior to working with her.) He intends to use her again. This is the good news, folks.

