

Woody Allen's erratic double bill

As an unprecedented two Woody Allen movies open in Dubai within three weeks of each other, *Rob Garratt* examines the iconic director's back catalogue to rate their chances



Midnight in Paris

Director Woody Allen is renowned as one of the most feted, but most frustrating, men in Hollywood. His lengthy canon of pictures is iconic, instantly recognisable and oft-parodied, with his movies pored over by buffs and regularly placed towards the top of best-ever polls. Yet for every fan there is a detractor charging him with complacency: Allen's late '70s heyday is long behind him, while his unyielding one-film-a-year work ethic means he churns out a fair amount of fan-only fodder.

Until this year Allen had failed to score a hit on his home turf since 1986's *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Instead he had come to be marketed as a leftfield, art-house auteur, banking a few million from each new release from a mainly European audience. Production costs are kept to a minimum and big stars queue up to work at union rates for the privilege of 'working with Woody'.

But at the tender age of 75 Allen suddenly scored the biggest hit of his career earlier this year with the delightfully escapist rom-com *Midnight in Paris*, Allen's highest-grossing film to date and a hit with the critics. Off the back of this success, schedulers are planning to bring the film and its predecessor, 2010's *You*

Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger, to the UAE in the next three weeks.

Allen's works are not the kind you would expect to do well in the Middle East. Now 45 films into his career, the director may as well be carving a niche within a niche. Retreading familiar themes of love, art and the meaninglessness of existence from his typically Jewish-intellectual, New York-centric vantage, his lead characters are invariably an elite class

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of academics and artists. In a city as culturally diverse as Dubai, films that rely not just on fluency in colloquial American-English, but a knowledge of Allen's very particular cultural and artistic benchmarks and values, are likely to struggle at the box office.

So how will *Midnight in Paris* fare in the UAE? Set to open on



You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger

December 8, it has already grossed Dhs275 million worldwide since its US release in May, bolstered by opening the Cannes Film Festival this year. On the surface it's Woody by numbers; struggling American author Gil (Owen Wilson) has romantic dreams of moving to Paris and walking in the rain, while his fiancé, practically-minded Inez, is intent on a Malibu beach house. The film's runaway success has been attributed to the twist; at midnight every night a mysterious taxi arrives that transports Gil back in time to the Paris heyday of the '20s he fantasises about (a rehash of Allen's 1985 movie *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, which saw cinema fanatic Cecilia step through the screen into the films she loves). The humour in these escapist sequences comes from flabbergasted Gil meeting his heroes, including Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald and Cole Porter, but it's not clear how well these key scenes will translate to Middle Eastern audiences who may be less familiar with these American figures.

But first to appear on the UAE's screens is the markedly less successful *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, which premiered in Cannes 18 months ago. Again it tells the story of a struggling American author, this time Roy (Josh Brolin). The fourth (and by no means worst) of the string of recent movies Allen has set in London, it tackles familiar themes of faith and fate. But clearly it failed to entertain – where *Midnight in Paris* picked up a 93 per cent approval rating on movie reviews website Rotten Tomatoes, this earlier film scored just 44 per cent. Ironically, the movie's more mainstream humour – and the strong moral questions asked by the central twist – could see this film proving more popular on these shores. *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* is scheduled to open in UAE cinemas next week. *Midnight in Paris* is scheduled to open on December 8

Our favourite Woody Allen films

10 Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989)

Black comedy exploring Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* scenario.

9 Melinda and Melinda (2004)

Two writers around a dinner table tell the same story – one as comedy, the other as tragedy.

8 Stardust Memories (1980)

Tricky Fellini-inspired autobiography that chronicles a celebrated director's contempt for his philistine fans.

7 Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008)

A latter-day classic, which paints a steamy love triangle between Javier Bardem, Penélope Cruz and Scarlett Johansson.

6 Hannah and Her Sisters (1986)

This story of two years in the life of three sisters remains rightly celebrated as one of Allen's best straight-up dramas.

5 Deconstructing Harry (1997)

The life and neurosis of novelist Harry Block are told through key scenes of his (autobiographic) books.

4 Zelig (1983)

A groundbreaking retro mockumentary about human chameleon Zelig (played by Allen).

3 Manhattan (1979)

Beautiful monochrome cinematography and a George Gershwin soundtrack are the backdrop to this trademark tale of love and life in New York.

2 Husbands and Wives (1992)

Shot on shaky hand-held cameras, this documentary-style flick explores the gritty breakdown of two marriages.

1 Annie Hall (1977)

It's the one he will be remembered for: the heartwarming yet humorous approach rewrote the rom-com genre, and won Oscars for best film, director and screenplay.



Annie Hall