

Episode 2 - Magic in the Moonlight (2014)

MUSIC - You Do Something To Me by Leo Reisman And His Orchestra

Introduction

MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT is the 44th film written and directed by Woody Allen, first released in 2014.

It's the 1920s and magician Stanley Crawford is asked by an old friend to help with a task. A rich family in the south of France is being swindled by a young clairvoyant. Stanley goes to investigate, but not everything is as it seems.

Beautifully shot in the south of France, MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT is one of Allen's light comedies with a deep heart. It's an easy watch with all the lovely costumes and gorgeous back drop and charismatic movie stars. But there's also a deeply philosophical point at the heart of it. And - I love this film.

Welcome to the Woody Allen Pages podcast, from me, the creator of the Woody Allen Pages website. This week, episode two, we look at 2014's MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT. We'll look at how this film came to be. What I loved and what I didn't love. And then some fun trivia about the film. Of course, spoilers are everywhere.

Conception and story

Allen's career is really on a roll in the early 2010s. He had some of his best reviewed and financially successful films in a decade or two with 2011's MIDNIGHT IN PARIS and 2013's BLUE JASMINE. It coincided with a decade-long period of Allen making films mainly in Europe, leaving his bubble of New York, and breathing new life into his work. But this film is the end of that first European run. He would not make a film in Europe again for another five years.

MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT is lovely, and in some ways it might just be lovely. Allen would deny this I'm sure, but it's very much the younger sibling of MIDNIGHT IN PARIS. Both films share an exotic French setting, the escapism of cinema and a breezy romantic plot with a deeper meaning beneath the surface. It's a really easy, if not terribly challenging watch.

It's worth noting that Allen wrote this film at the same time as writing what would be his next film - the cold, dark drama IRRATIONAL MAN. He had flipped back and forth about which project would come next, following the success of BLUE JASMINE. But IRRATIONAL MAN and BLUE JASMINE were too similar, and MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT would continue Allen's career trajectory of reacting against his last film. But perhaps writing both films together affected both scripts. MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT is perhaps so bright because IRRATIONAL MAN is so dark.

MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT doesn't reach for the sky but I believe this film sparkles. It doesn't rush, but it's an incredibly enjoyable film, with a couple of lovely twists. And I challenge you to watch it and not think that you should be spending more time in the South Of France.

HOWARD: To think there were more to life?

STANLEY: More what? That life doesn't end with death. That the universe works by design?

CAROLINE: That God exists.

STANLEY: Let's not get carried away. The woman is a charlatan. Because, depressing as the facts of existence are, they are the facts. There is no metaphysical world. What you see out there is what you get. I think Mr. Nietzsche has disposed of the God matter rather convincingly.

There's a few real life precedents for the story. Allen is a huge fan of magic, and knows the history of magic. So he pulled from real life and kind of mashed together a few strands for this story.

The first strand that Allen mashed into the film was one of the most important and famous magicians who has ever lived - HARRY HOUDINI, who is the basis for COLIN FIRTH's Stanley.

Houdini is best known for his daring escapes - from handcuffs, from water barrels, from underwater and often in full public view. He was at the height of his fame in the 1920s, the time this film was set.

But Houdini was more than an entertainer - he also liked to debunk spiritualists. I say that he liked it, but it was more of a passion for Houdini. Houdini loved magic, and he took almost personal offence when people abused the power of wonder that came with magic. For Houdini - it's all a trick, and he was public about it. Other magicians of the era actually pretended they had some sort of supernatural ability, and Houdini hated them for it. After he had become about as famous as he would ever get, Houdini turned his eye to debunking fake spiritualists that were swindling people.

The thing you have to know is that spiritualism was a big deal in the 1920s. It was a fad, sure, but a hugely popular one like anti vaxxers or super foods or 3D cinema. Some people were just really into it for a while, and thought it was the future. And people of the future will look back and wonder how anyone could be so dumb.

Seances, ouija boards and other nonsense loomed large in popular culture in 20s. This wasn't like now, where the fortune teller that you might find on the high street is above a shop, is sort of hidden away and shamed. People publicly and openly believed this stuff, including famous celebrities, and the middle and upper classes. It was even studied in a pseudo scientific level. It's something else alluded to in this film. The scene where there is discussion of starting a school to study spiritualism was the kind of nonsense talked about at this time.

The debunking of spiritualists was the itch that Allen wanted to scratch with this film. It allows Allen to play with the big ideas of God and faith that he loves so much.

He also returns to an old theme of self delusion. That the only way to be happy is to have delusions - like religion or a belief in a higher power.

Houdini became obsessed with spiritualism. He offered cash prizes for any so-called spiritualist who could show actual supernatural abilities. But Houdini was so obsessed that he, perhaps, wanted to believe.

He was genuinely open minded and willing to lose and be proven wrong. But time and time again, he just found swindlers. It's something he and Stanley has in common. Really, it would only take a minor rewrite to make the main character actually Houdini himself. Allen probably chose not to because he could make Stanley a more interesting character.

SOPHIE: I see a white house in Belgravia. 14...no, 16 Wilton Crescent. A piano...

STANLEY: Yes that's all correct and rather amazing. But I don't buy it. Because I'm a rational man who believes in a rational world. Any other way lies madness.

SOPHIE: You'd be happier if I was a fraud. Because then your whole fixed worldview wouldn't be shaken up.

STANLEY: No, it's quite the opposite. If you knew how much I don't want you to be a fake...

SOPHIE: But think how embarrassing it would be for you. Your whole life, you spent publicly crusading against spiritualism, and then, you'd have to come out with it and say that you were wrong.

STANLEY: But I'm not wrong.

The another strand for Stanley, and this story as a whole, is PYGMALION, and there is more than a little PYGMALION in MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT.

PYGMALION is a play written in 1913 by GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, and was famously adapted into the musical MY FAIR LADY - and Allen is a fan of both. In it, the cantankerous Professor Henry Higgins takes a poor street girl, Eliza Dolittle, into his care as a crass bet. He has to teach her how to be a proper lady, but ends up falling for her instead. Stanley and EMMA STONE's Sophie are very Henry Higgins And Eliza Dolittle.

PYGMALION is a trope. Allen's used it before, most notably in MIGHTY APHRODITE in 1995 and SMALL TIME CROOKS in 2000. But you can also see it in PRETTY WOMAN, THE GREAT GATSBY, CHARADE and many other films where a snob has to train someone from an apparently lower class but learns a lesson instead.

What makes this film even more of a throwback is the dialogue, and the back and forth between Sophie and Stanley. They bicker wonderfully, taking a cue from the 30s talkies, where they talked too fast and always said the right things.

SOPHIE: For some reason, my mental impressions are cloudy.

STANLEY: Cloudy. When you say your mental impressions are cloudy, are they cumulus clouds or cirrus?

HOWARD: Mr. Taplinger is a businessman.

MRS BAKER: What line of business?

STANLEY: The import-export trade.

SOPHIE: I see Chinese letters. Chinese writing.

STANLEY: Perhaps, you're visualizing my laundry ticket.

SOPHIE: You're making fun of me.

The dialogue is cruel, but only to be funny and to show character. Stanley just cannot get over himself and it's fun to watch him even try to climb over himself.

There's another aspect to PYGMALION in this film. Around the time of THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO's release in 1945, almost 30 years before this film, Allen would talk a lot about the films he used to see as a kid at cinemas. They were films from the 30s and 40s, that usually were escapist fantasies for the many Americans suffering from The Great Depression.

They were set in glamorous, exotic countries and featured the adventures of the upper classes. The film within THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO, called The Purple Rose of Cairo, is a perfect example. Other films like ERNST LUBITSCH'S THE MERRY WIDOW, FRANK CAPRA'S IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT and the original PYGMALION are also perfect examples of this from the 30s. Even those silly MARX BROTHERS films where they visit some exotic locale and mess things up for everyone fall into this group. Lots of people in tuxedos and beautiful dresses, talking with incredible wit, and having a whale of a time. Allen would also marvel at the white telephones.

And this is such a white telephone film. There are, I think, more tuxedos in this film than any other Woody Allen film. EMMA STONE and all the other women wearing wonderful vintage dresses. We are in the South Of France. There are wonderful parties. You just can't get more escapist than this. And after loving these films his whole life, Allen has made his white telephone film.

Then there's Wei Ling Soo, Stanley's Chinese magician identity. This was based on a really magician named CHUNG LING SOO, whose real name was WILLIAM ELLSWORTH ROBINSON. He was an American who was pretending to be a Chinese conjurer, who was active at the start of the 1900s, a couple of decades before the setting of this film.

Stanley being a version of CHUNG LING SOO, named Wei Ling Soo, doesn't really play into the plot that much. It does add to a fun opening sequence with great costumes and it adds an interesting flavour of the mystical to the proceedings.

Although it's worth noting the real CHUNG LING SOO never broke character. He probably wouldn't be parading around backstage speaking English. And Sophie, who later tells a story of seeing Wei Ling Soo as a child, seems to openly know that Wei Ling Soo is just an identity. Audiences definitely didn't know that about CHUNG LING SOO. And Stanley even says he is a famous debunker of mystics in the press conference scene. It seems unlikely that the press wouldn't know his real identity.

STANLEY: And you! You're supposed to knock when you're ready in the trunk. How do I know when you're all clear?

ASSISTANT: Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Crawford, I couldn't breathe in that...

STANLEY: Well, you're not hired to breathe!

ASSISTANT 2: But it was her first time, Mr. Crawford.

STANLEY: My God, we went over this routine all afternoon. How do I know when to begin sticking in the swords? I could have stabbed you to death, and then, I get blood on my ensemble.

But the whole Wei Ling Soo thing really just gives Stanley a secret to hide, and a way to pretend to be something he isn't. Because Stanley is also, like Sophie, not being honest about who is. And it's a nice bit of layering from Allen, because Stanley is also lying to himself.

So this is Allen's white telephone film. It's definitely a throwback in tone. Recent excursions into the past like MIDNIGHT IN PARIS and THE CURSE OF THE JADE SCORPION were modern films set in the past. Here it feels like the script could be written in the 30s.

That's both good and bad. Take the music for example. There's lots of period jazz. Allen usually leaves the American Jazz alone when he makes films in Europe, but this is not a film about continental Europeans. It's a bit of a cliché, but Allen let's the strings swell during the romantic moment. It's just like those old films. It's very obvious, but it works for me.

SOPHIE: You know, Stanley, I'm not quite as desperate as you make me out to be. There have actually been a number of, I don't know, substantial men who have fallen in love with me.

STANLEY: Really? Well, you could've fooled me. Although, with the ability you have, one does automatically become intriguing...And you do have agreeable features, but it's your gift, I'm sure, which is...Well, I wouldn't say charming, but it is impressive.

SOPHIE: I mean, even you just said I have agreeable features.

STANLEY: They're more than agreeable. Provided the light hits you just so.

SOPHIE: Can I ask what time of day that might be? Just in case I ever need to look my best for a job interview?

STANLEY: Dusk. You're prettiest at about 8:20 in the summer, when the light is fading.

SOPHIE: I see, the light must be fading, so that I'm not too visible.

STANLEY: Exactly. I'm thinking when I do the vanishing elephant trick, you must be lit precisely as I light the elephant.

SOPHIE: I don't think I'll pursue that.

Let's talk about the age difference. There's 28 years between COLIN FIRTH and EMMA STONE. Some people will find this a problem. Sure. But it's worth noting that Firth was younger than REX HARRISON in MY FAIR LADY, who was 56 and Eliza Dolittle was 19 or 20. It's not just how things were at the time. It's literally the plot. Stanley needs to be older and bitter and a know it all.

Stanley heartlessly badgers poor Sophie. He insults her relentlessly, but it's not that different from MY FAIR LADY or some of the wordy talkies that starred KATHERINE HEPBURN and others. That said - it's interesting on second watch, knowing Sophie is lying. I think she actually lets Stanley get to her in one scene where she reveals she knows who he is. It almost seems like she drops character for a moment.

SOPHIE: When I was much younger, years ago, I went and saw Wei Ling Soo. Have you heard of him? He's a Caucasian who disguised himself as a Chinese, and he billed himself as the Great Oriental Wizard.

STANLEY: I see, and did you enjoy his performance?

SOPHIE: I did, very much. He was brilliant. He, he vanished a live elephant. And it

was just...I mean, it just was completely shocking, but of course, it was mechanical tricks that one could learn with enough practice.

STANLEY: I see. And, your performance?

SOPHIE: I wouldn't call it a performance.

STANLEY: Well, call it what you will. I mean, it's a type of trickery, like card magic or vanishing an elephant.

SOPHIE: And I say you're Mr. Wei Ling Soo.

STANLEY: And I say there is nothing you can do that I cannot duplicate.

SOPHIE: I don't doubt it. You're great. But just because you can duplicate my miracles, in no way proves that mine are not real.

There are all manner of issues with the ending of PYGMALION and MY FAIR LADY. The ending has the leads ending up together, a move that Shaw himself rallied against, but saw no other way of ending the play with a happy ending without it. They spend the whole play bickering, with nothing in common. But they grow to respect each other and then they suddenly fall in love. There's no passion in their relationship in the lead up. But you do, somehow, want these fantastic characters to not be separated and apart by the end. There is some ambiguity in the ending of MY FAIR LADY. Henry and Eliza return together - but where does it go after that?

I feel the same for the ending of Stanley and Sophie. There's bickering and a bit of flirting, but there's no real romantic chemistry between the two. They are very different people and they learn from each other. But here, Allen gives us a happy ending.

It's something Allen has done before and never stopped regretting, when he tacked in a feel-good ending at the end of HANNAH AND HER SISTERS in 1986. He mentioned regretting that decision many times. And he's famously left audiences with some ambiguous or very unhappy endings before.

Here, in MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT, he gives us maybe the happiest of happy endings in all his decades of film making. It feels like Allen - the king of the bittersweet endings - gave in to the crowd on this one. Perhaps he knew he was making a crowd pleaser here. But the ending feels unearned. Yet, this film couldn't have ended on a bum note, like so many other Allen films.

The saving grace however is that the ending is so wonderfully written. It's a great bit of screenwriting - a set up you didn't know was a set up, and a great pay-off. Earlier in the film, we were treated to a seance, and we are too busy watching for the result, to see if Stanley will notice anything, to care too much about the sound.

SOPHIE: Harry Catledge, give me a sign. Give us a sign!

GRACE: Harry? Is that you, Harry?

SOPHIE: Spirit? Signal us once for "Yes." Twice for "No."

GRACE: Harry, are you okay? Are you happy?

Of course, we notice it. The audience learns that the sound is a sign. The characters even discuss it a few times. And then, wonderfully, at the end, when Stanley asks for a sign, it comes back.

STANLEY: If she'd given me a sign, I'd have taken her in my arms, carried her off and married her. All I was looking for was one sign. Sophie? Will you marry me?

Notice how Allen plays out the sound a couple of times. He knows the first sound, the first sign, is there to surprise us. Your heart stops for bit. Maybe the film was wrong footing us all along? We know that sound - and we thought we knew what it meant. By the third, it's a joy. We know what's going to happen, and we can't wait for Stanley to turn around and find out. Allen doesn't do many happy endings. It's actually been around decade since he last gave us a film that ended with a kiss, which was 2002's HOLLYWOOD ENDING. And this is a real Hollywood ending. And as far as happy endings go, it's certainly memorable and clever. It's a masterclass in screenwriting, a great set-up and a great pay-off.

But there's another pay-off that's equally good, if not better. It's the big reveal of the mystery, when Stanley swivels in his chair and makes himself known to Howard, played by SIMON MCBURNEY, and Sophie that he's onto them.

HOWARD: Now, you've got to understand that since we were boys, I have played second fiddle to that egomaniacal, self-regarding...

SOPHIE: Genius.

HOWARD: Yeah, he's a genius at what he does, and I turned out to be a mere mortal. But now, after years of trailing in his wake, and I admit, some envy and resentment, I have finally put one over the great Wei Ling Soo. I have fooled the man who could not be fooled.

STANLEY: Not quite, Howard.

HOWARD: How did...

STANLEY: You admired this effect when you saw my show in Berlin. I said I'd teach it to you if you behaved yourself, but you have not behaved.

Allen sets up this scene right from the start with this chair trick. It appears in the opening sequence with Wei Ling Soo, one of a couple of tricks. Now, of course, we all know the trick. It's just the magic of cinema for us. We know

COLIN FIRTH isn't darting across, and there's no in-camera trickery. We also don't know that it will come back into play.

Then Allen hides some dialogue about the trick in a bit of exposition between Stanley and Howard. He's just shining an extra light on it.

HOWARD: Nonetheless, you held us spellbound. And that last effect, from the sarcophagus into the empty chair, when you swivel around...I mean, I do a vanish-and-reappearance trick in my show where I transport my pretty assistant from one side of the stage to the other in a steamer trunk, but it is nothing compared to what you do.

STANLEY: I invented that effect myself. And if you're very good, when we have more time, I'll teach you all the moves. It's actually... It's very simple. You can do it anywhere.

HOWARD: It's a spectacular trick.

STANLEY: It's so good to see you.

Howard could have asked Stanley about the elephant trick, or the cutting the woman in half trick. But he asks about the chair. And Stanley mentions, almost casually, that it could be done anywhere. And then we move on.

It's enough to make us know exactly what's happening when Stanley later emerges behind a chair. Even better, Allen directs McBurney to throw in some misdirecting body language. In the moments leading up, he hangs an arm on the back of the chair. It doesn't mean anything normally, but it tricks the audience. You wouldn't put your arm there if someone was sitting in that seat. I imagine Firth was hiding there in real life to make the trick work. This time, the trick was in-camera. For a film about magic, it's misdirection at its finest.

It's also worth noting that there are no real plot holes here. That Howard is involved makes perfect sense. It still makes sense on rewatch. It's a good mystery and it is done with such fun, it's hard not to be swept up by it. Yes, it's light. Yes it's silly. But this is Woody Allen. He had a famous joke about dressing up as a moose.

But let's get into the key scene in the film. The scene that probably made the film worth making. It's the scene where Stanley is in the hospital, and his aunt, played wonderfully by EILEEN ATKINS, has been in a car accident and is in critical condition. But Stanley now believes that there is more to life. And with everything he knows disrupted by his dying aunt and at his weakest point, he decides to pray.

STANLEY: I don't know if you can hear me and I haven't always led an exemplary life. I've...I've not only been a skeptic, a non-believer, but been much worse...A man with contempt for, for people who give themselves over to the idea that, that there's

some kind of benevolent father figure up there. I've always said it was childish, wishful thinking, strictly for primitives, all these, all these hopes about a purpose for life, a larger meaning. That all our suffering will somehow accrue to some greater plan. But if what I see of late is real then I don't have all the answers. It's possible, even logical, that we are here by design, to serve some higher ideal. And that you could be real. And although I have no right to expect anything, my aunt, whom I love, is in mortal danger. And so, I ask you...I ask you...Wait a minute. This is the stupidest load of twaddle I have ever heard. My common sense tells me, I'm falling into a seductive morass of sugarcoated claptrap because I want my aunt to be all right.

It's one of the great moments in Woody Allen's film catalogue. The film almost seems to hold its breath as you watch Stanley do what he said he never would. It's one of those moments that can only happen in a Woody Allen film. In this light comedy, the question of the very existence of God is used as the dramatic climax.

But of course, Stanley changes his mind. And when he heads back, he is filled with a renewed sense of wanting to discover the truth. There's a genuinely nice moment that follows - blink and you'll miss it. Stanley returns to the house, ready to debunk Sophie once and for all. But before he leaves the car, he sits and has a moment to himself. He screws up his face, and it's like he has to really let go of the fantasy. Even though he was happy, there's no going back now. He's almost literally losing his religion. It's a lovely little moment.

What Stanley goes through is, in a way, what Allen goes through. Stanley is deeply cynical, but his trade is in wonder. He literally brings magic to people, but he is too cynical to believe in it himself.

In a way, it reflects Woody Allen's own predicament. He too, is too cynical to believe in the supernatural. He takes some shots at religion here and the Vatican as well. Yet, he makes escapist cinema that inspires wonder. Allen's cold world view is on show here, but he does fill the characters around Stanley with decent counter arguments for faith and belief.

That dichotomy of wonder and cynicism is really all that Allen shares with his lead character. Mercifully, Allen has a male lead here that doesn't appear to be a Woody Allen surrogate. Although maybe 40 years earlier, he maybe could have played the role, with a significant rewrite. COLIN FIRTH gives Stanley an upper class snobbiness that Allen, the actor, lacks. There's also just that simple Englishness.

The story is very much about Stanley and Sophie. There's no B plot here, which means even though Allen has packed the film with incredible talent, they don't have much to do. There are only two scenes in the whole film that doesn't

feature either Stanley or Sophie, and both feature other characters discussing Stanley or Sophie.

HOWARD: You know, I thought, "Maybe, she's the real thing."

STANLEY: There is no real thing, Howard! It's all phony! From the séance table, to the Vatican and beyond! I can't believe you're saying this.

Production, cast and crew

This film has all those great, great moments. And in between it's filled with just a lot of fun and a lot of beauty. There are several scenes where characters talk, that I definitely missed the gorgeous scenery. Take the scene where Stanley proposes, and we see these incredible grounds behind them as they argue.

The beautiful Catledge estate is actually two gorgeous estates in the south of France - Allen didn't just stay in one city. He also filmed in Nice, Antibes, Menton and Vence. They got around, and what a gorgeous get around it was.

DARIUS KHONDJI returns as cinematographer. He was Allen's top choice in this period, having been behind the camera for MIDNIGHT IN PARIS and TO ROME WITH LOVE. Both films shot their cities so beautifully their tourist boards should add Khondji to their hall of fame. And my god does Khondji just turn it on for this film. It is bright, warm and majestic. There's some gorgeous moments where the sun actually hits the camera and create lens flare. It's huge and obvious and they left it in. It fits into the summer European getaway vibe.

Khondji also shot in widescreen, something Allen had resisted for many years. He had made over forty films when he made this, and this was only his fourth in widescreen. Which is great - get a load of more South Of France across the edge of your screen. I like this film a lot, and probably half the reason is that gorgeous cinematography.

There is a particularly lovely scene at the Nice Observatory, which was designed by GUSTAVE EIFFEL - who also designed a famous tower in France which you might have heard of it. But the real breathtaking locations for me are the coast as seen from several winding roads that run up luscious mountain sides. It's so unspoilt that Google maps names long sections of the area as just unnamed roads.

Of course, France loves Allen. He's a superstar there, and France is consistently one of the countries where his films do best. He first filmed in France for WHAT'S NEW PUSSYCAT in 1965, and filmed parts of LOVE AND DEATH and EVERYONE SAYS I LOVE YOU in France. And ofcourse, there was MIDNIGHT IN PARIS, just a couple of years earlier. There's a lot more to say about Woody Allen and France, and we'll cover it in another episode, I'm sure.

The cast by all accounts loved being in the South Of France. None of the main cast were French, and only a couple of them spoke any French. So they all bonded, especially the supporting cast who had lots of days off to just explore the South of France, whilst Firth and Stone did their lead work. They also bonded over being in a Woody Allen film for the first time. Of the major cast, only ERICA LEERHSEN had ever worked with Allen before, appearing in a couple of films like HOLLYWOOD ENDING and ANYTHING ELSE a decade earlier.

I imagine Allen was having fun with this one too. Filming was apparently a breeze, and how grumpy can you really be when you are shooting with beautiful people in such a beautiful location with such a crowd pleasing script.

COLIN FIRTH does a fine job. He hams it up, and fits naturally with his outraged Henry Higgins act. Firth should probably take the role of Higgins one day. And I really love Stanley - the most developed character here.

STANLEY: There is, of course, no spirit world, and even if there were, you can be sure that some little American gypsy would not be the one blessed to unlock its secrets. Only a low-grade halfwit would fall for any of this.

GEORGE: But you're not implying that her mother and brother are halfwits?

STANLEY: Well, I haven't met them yet.

Then there's the radiant EMMA STONE. She seems made for this role - she is funny but aloof. She has a toughness when faced with Stanley, but she's not dismissive. She genuinely cares, and we genuinely love her.

Stone is a cinephile, and a big fan of Allen. She named her dog Alvy, after Allen's character from ANNIE HALL. Stone and Allen hit it off, and Stone apparently taught Allen how to use text messages. She would present an absent Allen with a Golden Globe and return for his next film IRRATIONAL MAN.

It helps that Stone is treated like a 1920s movie star. She gets given incredible costumes, and she is shot like a million bucks. There are so many lights on her at certain points of the film, that even Stone herself remarked that it looks like she is in a box of light.

SOPHIE: You know that you're the only person tonight who hasn't made a comment on my appearance.

STANLEY: I'm overwhelmed, Sophie. I never dreamed you could look this beautiful.

SOPHIE: That's more like it.

STANLEY: You must have moved mountains to achieve this effect.

SOPHIE: Thanks. And this is all without the added benefit of the lighting that you give your elephant.

MARCIA GAY HARDEN and JACKI WEAVER both seem to have drawn the short straw, and both had scenes cut from the film. A scene with executive producer RON L CHEZ was also cut. And photos exist of a sequence with Sophie and Stanley meeting gypsies, and another with them being driven around, that didn't make the finished film.

Who does shine is HAMISH LINKLATER, who is adorable as Brice, Sophie's charming but naive suitor. He's a good comic actor, often cast as the nice guy. And here he's playing to type. Whereas Stanley is cold, and Sophie is a mystery, Brice is the much needed heart of the film. If he was too rich and unlikeable, the film wouldn't work at all.

BRICE: Now, Sophie looked into my eyes and told me things about me she could never have known. About old girlfriends I'd had, and places I've traveled to.

STANLEY: Good heavens. You think she can do it with me?

BRICE: Of course. Of course. Whatever questions you have about life, the hereafter...Here, cheers. Perhaps there's a departed loved one you wish to make contact with. Sophie sees all. She can predict the future. In short, she's a visionary.

STANLEY: And, I'm told she's very pleasant to look at.

BRICE: She's a visionary and a vision.

The other real MVP for me is SONIA GRANDE, the costume designer for all of Allen's continental European films to date. She kills it with the period dress, with many incredible outfits for EMMA STONE and beautiful get ups for the extras. There's also some nice vintage cars.

Joining Allen for a time in the South of France was the EDDY DAVIS NEW ORLEANS JAZZ BAND, Woody Allen's regular band, who plays most Monday's at the Café Carlyle in New York. The cast and crew attended a Woody Allen jazz performance in Antibes in the middle of the production. The band's piano player CONAL FOWKES contributes to the film's score.

Speaking of score, the opening credits song is YOU DO SOMETHING TO ME, performed by LEO REISMAN & HIS ORCHESTRA and written by perennial Allen favourite COLE PORTER. Allen actually used the song previously in a big musical number in MIGHTY APHRODITE. He obviously loves it, but thematically it ties in with the Magic theme. There's a particular couplet that suspect made Allen choose the song, which is:

Let me live 'neath your spell

You do that voodoo that you do so well

Release and reception

MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT premiered in the US, opening on the 25th July 2014, with a couple of red carpet galas the week before.

The film got very middling reviews, and I feel like it was undeserved. MIDNIGHT IN PARIS was a bit hit, and this really treads a similar tone of crowd pleasing fun with a big bit of theme in the middle. But this one just failed to translate.

Maybe by now Allen's European schtick had kinda run tired. Having only made two films in America in the ten years leading up to this, Allen would make his next four in the states. But MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT still did ok, earning 51 million worldwide, better than most of his output in the 2000s.

I really love this one. I'm surprised that in a vote on our website, a lot of people thought this was one of Allen's weaker films. For me it's in the group of delightful crowd pleasers with a heavy heart that Allen does so well. See ZELIG, BULLETS OVER BROADWAY and MIDNIGHT IN PARIS. A bit of FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE in a bit of ERNST LUBITSCH.

It is so lovely to just sit in this film. It would never happen, but if Stanley, Sophie and Howard continued their adventures debunking crazy mystics around Europe, I would watch that. If it meant more sparkling arguments, more silly magic, more tuxedos and more gorgeous vistas.

Yes it has its flaws - and it's utterly throwback. But this is a holiday in the South of France with impossibly charming people and a delicious mystery. I mean, who rushes around when the scenery is so pretty?

And that message at its heart - it might be one of the most perfect examples of what Allen has spent fifty years trying to say. That we live in a meaningless universe, that we delude ourselves with superstition. And in the end there is no God, but there is romance and there is beauty and there is each other. Allen doesn't give us many happy endings, so I enjoy this one all the more.

Fun facts

Here's a couple of fun facts about MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT.

The real CHUNG LING SOO met with a grisly end, performing his famous trick of catching a bullet with his hands. One night in 1918, he failed to check the replica guns properly, and he was shot. He said to an assistant to drop the curtain, something's happened. It was the only time he had ever spoken English with that persona.

During this time, Allen started using a bit of CGI. He obviously doesn't have the budget or the time to create the most incredible effects.

But a few years earlier, to imagine Woody Allen and CGI together was impossible. There's two very obvious shots for me, all to do with the observatory scene. One is the flash of lightning and the second is the night sky scene from the observatory. Despite it being CGI, it was used as part of the key art on the poster.

HAMISH LINKLATER sings in the film but doesn't play his own ukulele. That's handled by CYNTHIA SAYER, a long time member of Woody Allen's jazz band. She had played ukulele for a Woody Allen film before - way back in 1985's THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO, almost thirty years earlier, in a scene where MIA FARROW pretends to play a ukulele.

STANLEY: What is that dreadful noise?

CAROLINE: My brother. He practices serenading Sophie.

BRYCE performs THOU SWELL

Allen wrote this film and IRRATIONAL MAN concurrently. He also wrote another big project at the same time - the BULLETS OVER BROADWAY musical. He wrote the book from the screenplay of his 1994 film which he co-wrote with DOUGLAS MCGRATH. It opened in August of 2014, the same time as this film was starting to roll out around the world. We'll talk more about that when we get the BULLETS OVER BROADWAY, the film.

Outro

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Woody Allen Pages podcast.

Next week - we look at one of Allen's early, funny ones. The one that, for me, seems most relevant in these crazy times.

SOPHIE: I'm receiving a...It's cloudy. Cloudy..

STANLEY: Here comes the usual theatrical fertilizer.