

Episode 4 - BULLETS OVER BROADWAY (1994)

MUSIC: Toot Toot Tootsie - Al Jolson

Introduction

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY is the 23rd film written and directed by Woody Allen, first released in 1994.

JOHN CUSACK stars as David Shayne, a struggling playwright who agrees to take some mob money to put on his latest play. The catch - he has to cast a mobster's girl, and face off with her bodyguard - in more ways than one.

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY is one of Woody Allen's very best films, and it mixes so many elements that makes Allen great. The jazz era setting, the excellent costumes, the memorable characters, the big statement on the nature of art and so much more. It swept the awards season and audiences loved it too.

Welcome to the Woody Allen Pages podcast, from me, the creator of the Woody Allen Pages website. This week, episode four, we look at 1994's BULLETS OVER BROADWAY. As usual we look at how the film was made, the good and the bad, and lots of fun facts. Of course, spoilers are everywhere.

Conception and story

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY is the first and only writing collaboration between Woody Allen and DOUGLAS MCGRATH. McGrath was a friend and writer, and Allen has said that every so often he liked to collaborate with someone and not have the process be so lonely. He wrote with MICKEY ROSE in the 60s and 70s. He wrote with MARSHALL BRICKMAN in the 70s and on 1993's MANHATTAN MURDER MYSTERY, the Woody Allen film that preceded this one. Yet, in the 25 plus years since this film, Allen has never collaborated with another writer again. Although McGrath, who also acts, has appeared in Allen's future films as an actor.

At the time, McGrath had written for SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE and had one screenwriting credit under his belt - 1993's BORN YESTERDAY, a comedy that starred MELANIE GRIFFITH, JOHN GOODMAN and DON JOHNSON. It was a remake of the 1950 film, and both are adaptations of a GARSON KANIN play.

As the story goes, Allen gave McGrath five or so script ideas to work on. Two of the abandoned ideas ultimately turned into SMALL TIME CROOKS and THE CURSE OF THE JADE SCORPION. I think A RAINY DAY IN NEW YORK was one as well. But McGrath chose the one about a gangster who turned out to be a talented playwright. He thought that one was the least like treading old ground for Allen.

It's interesting to know the ideas that Allen couldn't choose between. Because BULLETS OVER BROADWAY turned out so much better than those other films. And when you think about it they all share that same path of broad comic premise with some nugget of philosophy behind it. How come this one came out so well? Well, we'll get into that.

In the finished film, it's hard to see what's Allen's and what isn't. Allen used McGrath as a sounding board, but did all the actual putting of pen to page. So everything goes through his filter last and feels like Woody Allen. I don't think this film has any elements that makes it feel like there's another writer's influence on the script. If they never said it was a co-write, I doubt anyone would notice. But if it's like how Allen worked with MARSHALL BRICKMAN, they both contributed ideas.

Originally, Allen and McGrath developed the lead role of David, the playwright at the heart of the film, for Allen himself. He would be an older guy, perhaps a university professor that occasionally wrote acclaimed plays. But as the pair developed the film they decided to make David more young and idealistic (and threw some of the older character's views into Flender, played by ROB REINER).

Even though he's no longer the lead, you can still hear Allen's voice in the character of David, but it was no longer a role for Allen to play - and ultimately he would not appear at all. You can almost imagine when David is fighting for creative control, it's the words Allen himself might have used when fighting for full control of his filmmaking in real life.

DAVID: I'm an artist, and I won't change a word of my play to pander to some commercial Broadway audience!

JULIAN: I'm not arguing with you! Do you see me arguing? Your play is great as is. It's real. It makes a point. It's confrontational.

DAVID: Then why won't you produce it?

JULIAN: Because I cannot afford another failure. David, the play's too heavy.

DAVID: But not everybody writes to distract. It's the theater's duty not just to entertain but to transform men's souls.

JULIAN: Oh, come on. You're not at one of your sidewalk cafes in Greenwich Village. This is Broadway.

DAVID: You said you believed in my play!

JULIAN: What do you want me to say? I'm tapped out. Maybe if we got some big-time director interested I could scare up backers.

DAVID: No, no, no. I'm directing this play.

JULIAN: Ohh, will you listen to this guy? Where's your track record?

DAVID: I won't see my work mangled again. I've been through this twice before. Two powerful scripts, could have been tremendous successes and I had to watch actors change my dialogue and directors misinterpret everything!

JULIAN: I know. I know. You're an artist. Let me tell you, kid, that's the real world out there, and it's a lot rougher than you think.

Allen had seen his work, like his script for WHAT'S NEW PUSSYCAT, much maligned and mangled by directors and the studio. Allen, of course, enjoys full creative control of his work.

Along with ageing down David, the pair quickly moved the film's setting to the 1920s. They didn't want to work in contemporary times and deal with a modern gangster or how Broadway is now.

Of course, Allen loves this era anyway. Woody Allen has made more films set in the period between the two World Wars than any other. Films like ZELIG, MIDNIGHT IN PARIS, CURSE OF THE JADE SCORPION, MAGIC IN THE MOONLIGHT, THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO, SWEET AND LOWDOWN and more are set in the 20s or 30s. When Allen announces a new film and it's set in the jazz era, it's a bit like Scorsese announcing a film about crime.

For Allen this is a golden era. The music was great. The nightclubs were happening. Broadway was in its prime. The outfits and cars look killer. So why not throw all of that together into one film.

So we have a comedic premise and we have the great setting of the 1920s. And we have David the playwright who has his play taken over by a gangster. The play brings a structure to the film. We are putting on a show, like so many MUPPETS films. And putting-on-a-show films have that built in tension. You know the show will come at the end of the film and it will either be a triumph or it will go horribly wrong.

Allen knows a bit about playwrighting. Before he made films he wrote a couple of acclaimed plays - DON'T DRINK THE WATER and PLAY IT AGAIN SAM. Those were comedies, but he wrote a more serious play called THE FLOATING LIGHTBULB that was performed in 1981. I assume Allen calls on that experience of table reads and how rehearsals work for this film.

HELEN: Yes, yes. Oh, my goodness' sake. I can't believe I'm here. Oh-ho, look at this. Look at this. Would you look? Oh, this old theater. This church. So replete with memories. So full of ghosts. Mrs. Alving. Uncle Vanya. There's Cordelia. Here's Ophelia. Clytemenstra! Each performance a birth. Each curtain a death.

Allen is very good at upping the tension as we get closer to what we know must happen. JENNIFER TILLY's Olive is just a time bomb. The moment David agrees to let her be in his play, we know it's only going to end in one of two ways - really well or really the opposite of well. When Cheech turns out to be a natural talent and David decides to go with it, we know that it's going to cause more problems, even though it's going to improve the play.

Allen doesn't just set up a problem and we watch it play out towards the end of the film with the big show. He actually stacks them up along the way. He adds Helen Sinclair who has her own designs on the script. Warner Purcell's increasing weight problem can't help, and neither can his affair with Olive. Everything serves a single purpose - to make us worry about opening night. And over the course of the film we seesaw from feeling like things might be ok to this will be a car crash and back again.

In fact, there is a scene just before opening night where manager Julian, played by JACK WARDEN, and gangster Nick Valenti, played by JOE VITERELLI, have one last scene together. The scene doesn't advance the plot, or teaches us anything new about these characters. It's just a short scene designed to remind us of one thing - things are about to go wrong.

NICK: Listen, when she gets here, tell her you're gonna give her some new lines. You know, like we discussed.

JULIAN: Yeah. Let me level with you, Mr. V. Do you mind if I call you Nick? You see, Nick, you don't fiddle with a winning show. Every script reaches a point where, in the professional judgment of the producer, the director, you're finished. You can't distort the plot. Now, we're about ready to open. Changes could be harmful. No, the show is basically frozen.

NICK: Let's avoid confusion.

JULIAN: Sure.

NICK: She'll get some new fuckin' lines or I'll nail your kneecaps to the dance floor.

But of course, we care more than just about the play. There's a big ethical, philosophical question at the heart of the film that Allen asks, and then answers. Is art worth a human life?

It's funny because in MANHATTAN, one of Allen's most celebrated films, he declares that art is what is worth living for. But is it worth dying for?

A scene near the start of the film lays out the whole story. It's great screenwriting - Allen sets up a scene where you are learning about the characters. They make this lofty statement designed to show you who they are. And of course for David, that's not who he remains.

RITA: You know, I think the mistake we women make is we fall in love with the artist - Hey, you guys, are you listening?

DAVID: Yes, yes.

RITA: We fall in love with the artist, not the man.

FLENDER: I don't think that's a mistake. How is that a mistake?

ELLEN: The artist makes the man.

FLENDER: You can't separate 'em. No, look. Say there was a burning building and you could rush in, and you could save only one thing: either the last known copy of Shakespeare's plays or some anonymous human being.

FLENDER: What would you do?

DAVID: You cannot deprive the world of those plays.

FLENDER: Correct.

WAITER: Phone call, David.

RITA: It's an inanimate object.

FLENDER: It's not an inanimate object! It's art! Art is life! It lives!

Although there's some gun play and cartoon violence, we don't expect a death for a long time in the film. But slowly, that little metaphor turns literal. And it's not David who ends up clashing with his apparent antagonist I Olive. It's Cheech, and David actually tries to save Olive.

DAVID: Let's say she was ruining the play. Does that mean that she deserves to die.

CHEECH: There was no way to fire her.

DAVID: What kind of inhuman monster are you?

CHEECH: I think you'd better leave.

DAVID: I don't think I will. I think I'd better stay.

CHEECH: You should be thanking me. We're both in this together.

DAVID: No, we're not. I didn't want her dead. See? You understand what I'm saying? I'm not in anything.

CHEECH: You choose her over the show?

DAVID: Of course. Of course I do! Yes!

Which is David's journey. To go from a hoity-toity no-one ruins my film kind of guy, who brags about artistic integrity with other full of shit artists in the village, to a man who will try and stand up to a gangster to save the life of someone he doesn't even like.

It's very Woody Allen. And he puts these big ideas in the middle of his comedies. And Allen seems to share David's view in real life. He often talks about art as just one of the distractions that gets us through life. He often maintains that there is nothing special about the role of artists in our lives - it's just another job.

Allen said it best when talking about this film. David is not the artist. Cheech is the artist. David actually compromises right from the beginning. Even he says it - he's trying and becomes ok. It just comes naturally to Cheech.

It's so interesting what Allen does with Cheech. He makes us change our minds about him several times over the course of the film. And he does it by making him the antagonist to many of the other characters. We hate Olive (in a love hate kind of way), so we like Cheech. But when he interrupts David during rehearsals, we think of him as cruel. But when David warms to him, we warm to him. But then he turns on David, and we hate him. Then he betrays Nick Valenti and kind of stands up to him, and we kind of want him to get away.

I find it super interesting that David warms to Cheech at all. Conflict is the stuff of screenwriting, in both drama and comedy. And it would be easy for Cheech and David to further become enemies. For this to be a battle over the play. Instead David concedes, and a friendship kind of blossoms. They have some sweet scenes together. In the whole putting-on-a-show momentum of the film, when they team up, we think it's all going to be alright. It's a nice buddy film for a little while.

DAVID: I take it all back. It was a good suggestion, and I apologize.

CHEECH: Say hello to Violet. DAVID: Hi, Violet.

VIOLET: Hi, nice to meet you. Who's this, Cheech?

CHEECH: He's a writer.

DAVID: I'm a struggling writer.

CHEECH: You wanna know what the problem with your story is? DAVID: What's the problem? Are you gonna do some more rewrites?

CHEECH: Sit down. Take a load off your feet. Moe, go on. Come here. Get him a beer. DAVID: Why not?

Of course, the pair don't really become friends and Cheech doesn't really change. He doesn't go on an emotional journey and he's kind of the same guy at the end as he is at the start. He starts to care about protecting his work, but that just seems part of the loyal and violent streak he's always had. Cheech casually mentions that he's a killer and just kills people because he decided they deserved it.

DAVID: Mr. Marx says that you, uh, actually rubbed a few people out. Is that true?

CHEECH: What is this, the third degree? DAVID: Not at all. CHEECH: Then why you sayin' that for? DAVID: I'm just really...The truth is I'm fascinated. CHEECH: I took care of a few guys. - DAVID: Why? CHEECH: Why, why? I don't know why. They cheated Mr. V. They went back on a debt. I'll tell you one thing. I never rubbed out a guy who didn't deserve it. DAVID: Uh, so what does it actually feel like when you

*actually... CHEECH: What? Kill a man? It feels okay. DAVID: It feels okay?
CHEECH: Yeah. DAVID: Even the first time? CHEECH: First time? First time was a
punk in prison. He squealed on me, and I stuck an ice pick in his back. DAVID: An
ice pick? CHEECH: An ice pick, yeah. Had to do it over and over, 40 times. It was a
mess. Forget about it.*

Allen just cleverly moves chess pieces around him to make it look like he's growing. That said, there was an alternate ending where Cheech lived and went onto Hollywood, only to discover it's much more cut throat than the mob. It's a terrible lighthearted ending that would have taken all the weight out of this film.

The film now ends with a wonderful scene of David on a street talking about the artist versus the man. By the end, he's become Julian, arguing for compromise. Now here he is, having realised he's no artist and that artists have no right to create their own moral universe.

The scene was a reshoot - apparently the only one - and its vintage Woody Allen. It's hilarious, highly quotable, cinematic and manages to mix the whole theme of the film with a little bit of romance. It's a lovely ending.

DAVID: Well, what if it turned out that I wasn't really an artist?

ELLEN: I could love a man if he's not a real artist but I couldn't love an artist if he's not a real man.

FLENDER: This is all academic. She's with me now. You're with me now.

DAVID: Do you really want to be with Flender?

FLENDER: Yes.

ELLEN: Hey! Flender is a great lover. RITA: Hey, I slept with Flender. He was just okay. Really?

FLENDER: Rita, please! What are you talking about? That was years ago, during your free-love period.

ELLEN: I feel it's relational. For me, he's great.

RITA: Huh, interesting. Are you talking pure mechanics or what?

ELLEN: His technique is prodigious.

FLENDER: Prodigious!

DAVID: You're confusing sex and love.

RITA: No, for me, love is very deep. Sex only has to go a few inches.

Before that, Allen makes an in-joke about endings. He has said many times that he regrets the happy ending he tacked onto the end of 1986's HANNAH AND HER SISTERS. In that film, he made one of the characters pregnant and delivered a great happy ending. Here, Cheech in his dying breath makes the same suggestion. I don't know what Allen was trying to say, but it's a fun shot at his own history.

CHEECH: The last line...

DAVID: Yes?

CHEECH: ...in the play. Tell Sylvia Poston to say she's pregnant. It'll be a great finish.

All that highfalutin stuff aside, there's plenty here that is funny for funny's sake, with no higher meaning. There's plenty of broad humour to be mined from these cartoonish characters. I wonder if Allen based any of them from real life or from his experience working with actors and on Broadway.

Warner Purcell seems to be some sort of RICHARD BURTON type, although ORSON WELLES is a more likely inspiration for the ballooning weight problem. Manager Julian Marx looks like JACK ROLLINS, Allen's actual manager.

Of course, there's the scene stealing Helen Sinclair. I wonder if Allen based her on any actual divas that Allen had come across. Allen's worked with some divas, most recently ELAINE STRITCH in the 1987 film SEPTEMBER. Allen and Stritch really hit it off and I wonder if there's any character elements he took from her.

She has her famous catchphrase - 'Don't speak'. It's such a broad joke - that Helen puts her hand in David's mouth and asks him not to speak. It's oh so dramatic of Helen.

HELEN: Make a birthday wish.

DAVID: I have.

HELEN: I hope you get everything in life that you want.

DAVID: Helen, have you thought about what I said before about the way I feel?

HELEN: Don't speak.

DAVID: But I want to express...

HELEN: Don't speak. Don't.

DAVID: Just a few things I want to tell you.

HELEN: Don't speak.

DAVID: When we first met...

HELEN: No, no. Don't speak. Please don't speak. Please don't speak. No! No! No! Go!

Go, gentle Scorpio, go! Your Pisces wishes you every happy return.

DAVID: Just one...

HELEN: Don't speak!

So it's nice that Allen uses it as Cheech's final line - his last words is to tell David not to speak. Just another very dumb, broad joke that totally lands for me. And it was apparently an improv by Palminteri.

CHEECH: It'll be a great finish.

DAVID: Oh, God, that's so great.

CHEECH: No. Don't speak. Don't speak.

Production

Allen and his casting director JULIET TAYLOR put together an incredible cast here. The tension between the two of them, who had at this point worked together for over 20 years, was that Allen wanted to work with the same people and Taylor wanted Allen to work with new people. They come to a good compromise here. There's some great returners and some great new people.

JOHN CUSACK had worked with Allen in 1991's SHADOWS AND FOG. Everyone else around him gets to be big and outrageous whilst Cusack quietly holds the film down with a more honest performance. Yes, he totally does a Woody Allen impression, but does it well, and sells it so easily. I think of films like THE CURSE OF THE JADE SCORPION, and how better it would have been with Cusack in the lead instead of Allen.

OLIVE: A likely story. It's very hard to get good help these days.

NICK: Sorry you guys had to hear that.

DAVID: I'm feeling fairly dizzy.

NICK: Some problems with the firm.

DAVID: Really? What type of firm is it, Nick?

NICK: It's a don't stick your nose in other people's business and it won't get broken type of firm.

DAVID: Yeah. I see, I see. Thank you.

NICK: That's what kind of firm.

DAVID: I'm feeling a bit unstable. I think maybe I'll go and check into a sanitarium and get the help that I need. And we'll talk later because it's been good.

Yet, of the four main cast members, Cusack was the only one who wasn't nominated for an Academy Award. Because everyone else is just chewing up he screen.

This was, incredibly, CHAZZ PALMINTERI's second ever film role. He was great in A BRONX TALE, which was based on a play he wrote about his own life, and was just stepping into Hollywood stardom. Allen got to see A BRONX TALE and cast him straight way. It's great casting because Palminteri could play a gangster with no problems, but is also a genuine playwright.

DAVID: You ever think about doin' anything else?

CHEECH: Like what?

DAVID: Like writing.

CHEECH: Writing.

DAVID: Yeah.

CHEECH: Come on, I've been collecting for the Mob since I was 16.

DAVID: You have a huge gift.

CHEECH: Yeah.

DAVID: No, I'm serious. Really, it's...it's uncanny. I mean, your instincts. Dramatic instincts.

CHEECH: Listen to me. Your play was very good. Your play was very good.

DAVID: Really enviable.

CHEECH: You just didn't use your head. Sometimes people don't think.

DAVID: Well, sure, for you it's simple, you know? To someone who can draw, it all seems logical, but for someone who can't...I studied playwriting with every teacher. I read every book.

CHEECH: Let me tell you about teachers. I hate teachers. Those blue-haired bitches used to whack us with rulers. Forget teachers.

DAVID: There was a boy I knew when I was growing up, and he played accordion.

CHEECH: Yeah?

DAVID: I loved accordion. And I practiced and practiced, and I got fluent. Yet he would squeeze one single note, and the sound of it would make you cry.

CHEECH: I used to want to dance. You know that? I mean it. I wanted to dance. You ever see George Raft dance?

DAVID: Oh, yeah.

JENNIFER TILLY is fun whenever she's on the screen as Olive. She's a one note character and Allen uses her quite sparingly and it's enough that we don't get sick of her. She's a fun agent of chaos, leaving destruction everywhere.

OLIVE: what I'm doing, Cheech, is, I'm working on a superior laugh. Like ha-ha-ha. Hee-hee-hee. I wanna throw that in when Sylvia threatens to leave, and then I burst into tears. Well, you know, he says no, but what the hell kind of dull show is he putting on anyway?

And of course, DIANNE WIEST. She's worked with Allen many times before, but she's usually introverted and intense. Here, she is broad and loud, and she was initially scared to take on the role. But Allen wanted her, and she was rewarded with an Academy Award. The trick to finding the character for her, she said, was to speak lower.

HELEN: You must be joking! You want me to play some frumpy housewife who gets dumped for a flapper? Don't you remember who I am? Don't you know who you represent? I'm Helen Sinclair!

SID: Definitely! You are definitely Helen Sinclair. I look at you and I say Helen Sinclair! But who better to play that role?

HELEN: Under whose direction? Some novice!

SID: He's the author.

HELEN: Of two flops.

SID: Julian says it was the directors that messed up those projects.

HELEN: Julian Marx! I do plays put on by Belasco or Sam Harris. Not some Yiddish pants salesman turned producer. My ex-husband used to say, If you're gonna go down, go down with the best of them.

SID: Which ex-husband?

HELEN: Oh, I don't know which ex-husband. The one with the moustache.

I can kind of keep listing people. JACK WARDEN. JIM BROADBENT. TRACEY ULLMAN. MARY LOUISE PARKER. All great, and all look like they were having fun. And then there's ROB REINER. Who, just looking at him, he's constantly hilarious. I would love to see the further adventures of Sheldon Flender.

FLENDER: No truly great artist has ever been appreciated in his lifetime.

DAVID: Not one?

FLENDER: No, no.

DAVID: Flender.

FLENDER: Take, uh, uh... Van Gogh or Edgar Allen Poe. Poe died poor and freezing with his cat curled on his feet.

RITA: David, don't give up on it. Maybe it'll be produced posthumously.

FLENDER: You know, I have never had a play produced.

DAVID: That's right.

FLENDER: And I've written one play every year for the past 20 years.

DAVID: That's because you're a genius. The proof is that both common people and intellectuals find your work completely incoherent. It means you're a genius.

The production went fairly smoothly - no one got recast, no large reshoots, just another delightful film and knocked out at record time if it was any other directors.

So with a killer script and a killer cast all set, we have to talk about the production, and the production values.

Back as cinematographer is CARLO DI PALMA, who is making his eighth film with Allen. They had more recently developed a very erratic handheld camera style for HUSBANDS AND WIVES and MANHATTAN MURDER MYSTERY. But

they dial it back to be something more conventional. This film isn't about the camera or the point of view.

But they do keep one element from the previous couple of films which is shooting long takes, many of them lasting well over two minutes. The feeling we get is like someone filming a actual stage play and the acting has some unnatural gaps you wouldn't get in a conventional film that would have cut them out. Yet the performances were natural and great. I particularly love the long scene where David confronts Cheech in the pool hall. The camera lets the pair of actors walk right to the back of the room and we lose sight of them at times. We are almost just spying in on the action. Cusack and Palminteri act the shit out of it too.

DAVID: How could you? How could you!

CHEECH: Nobody's gonna ruin my play.

DAVID: Oh, your play? That's the second time you called it your play.

CHEECH: All right, our play. Didn't it cut you up inside to hear her say it? Huh?

DAVID: We would've survived it!

CHEECH: Survived it? Is that what you want? When we had a great thing, a thing of beauty?

DAVID: But, Cheech! To kill her!

CHEECH: She was a tramp.

DAVID: It's a free country.

CHEECH: Then leave me alone.

DAVID: No, I will not leave you alone. Didn't anybody ever teach you that it's morally wrong, that it's a sin to...Who am I talking to? Jesus Christ!

Then there's the colour. The film is so warm. Everything is red and yellow, and it's doubled down with sets that emphasise those warm tones. It's kind of sepia toned nostalgia, but it's actually glowing and alive, not stuck in a photo. Your eyes adjust, but if you step back and look at some of the scenes, it's just red. Even CARLO DI PALMA remarked that everyone looked like tomatoes.

This isn't the picture perfect city postcards that Allen would make a decade later in Europe. It's not the widescreen urban beauty that GORDON WILLIS shot for Allen in films like MANHATTAN. This is something more raw. The extreme palette makes it look rough and tough.

Allen actually worked on this film with a little extra budget than usual. That extra cost went to costumes, cars and sets. Allen and his team found enough Art Deco locations to past muster, like the Edison Hotel, which was constructed in 1931, and The New Yorker Hotel, constructed in 1930.

They'd also dress down a couple of streets in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Some stock footage is used to set the scene and, of course, there's always Central Park which is still, wonderfully, Central Park.

HELEN: This is my favorite spot in the park. And in winter, when it's covered with snow at about 4:30 in the afternoon, when it's just getting dark and the lights come on it's all misty. And you can just see the silhouettes of the Manhattan skyline through the trees. And it's magical. It's magical.

Academy Award nominations were given to the production designers SANTO LOQUASTO and SUSAN BODE, as well as to costume designer JEFFREY KURLAND. Obviously the most show-y stuff gets the praise. The incredible costumes for the diva Helen Sinclair are obviously fantastic. I really love David, who is always subtly dishevelled compared to the sharp dressing gangsters. That said, Allen's budgets were still incredibly low compared to just about anyone else.

Which is a long way for me to make the point that this feels a bit more raw than your usual comedy films. The long takes and interesting style gives a feel of independent cinema. It's a bit like IGGY POP doing an ABBA cover. That tension is delicious, and it's what is missing in some of Allen's later comedies like ANYTHING ELSE.

And it helped that this was the mid 90s and we lived in a new age of indie American cinema. QUENTIN TARANTINO, KEVIN SMITH and STEPHEN SODERBERGH were all the rage, creating a scene that sat away from the mainstream blockbusters but was quickly finding an audience. This film has more in common with CLERKS and the the future mumblecore scene than, say, DUMB AND DUMBER.

And after a handful of films with very little music, Allen returns of a jazzy score, and uses enough songs to warrant the release of a commercial soundtrack. It had actually been 1987's RADIO DAYS since he last had a commercial soundtrack, seven years and seven films earlier.

Only some of it was score - Cheech has UP A LAZY RIVER as a recurring theme. But most of the music comes from the world of the film. We hang out in ballrooms and night clubs where music plays. There's a couple of arranged numbers at the nightclub, put together by regular Allen contributor DICK HYMAN.

The main credits song is TOOT TOOT TOOTSIE performed by Al Jolson. It's a goodbye song that was a Broadway hit in 1922, and helps to set the vibe of the film that follows. There doesn't seem to be a bigger connection than that, and the song wasn't even used in the BULLETS OVER BROADWAY musical, which we will talk about.

Release and reception

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY was released in the US on 21 October 1994. It played several film festivals before that including a world premiere at the Venice Film Festival and then playing Toronto, Chicago and New York.

This was Allen's first film with a new studio - one made just for him. SWEETLAND FILMS was started by Allen's close friend JEAN DOUMANIAN and her husband JACQUI SAFRA. The film company started as a vehicle for Allen, and essentially turned him into an independent filmmaker. They would produce Allen's films for the rest of the 90s, although the deal would end in acrimony. In the meantime though, they were willing to gamble a little extra on Allen to see what the return would be like. And the returns were good - BULLETS OVER BROADWAY was Allen's most critically acclaimed and commercially successful film of the entire 1990s.

Probably because of the Sweetland deal, Allen actually did a series of interviews about the film. He allowed for a colourful poster featuring members of the cast and they appear to have done a photo shoot for poster - not just using a shot from the film. There was also that commercially released soundtrack. This all felt like Allen actually making some concessions to be liked.

And like it people did. The common perception, especially around this time, was that Allen's best work is the films he was in. They always did better at the box office too. This film put that idea kind of to rest. Until he hit on MATCH POINT in 2005, this would be Allen's most successful film where he didn't appear behind INTERIORS. And INTERIORS really only really got there because it followed ANNIE HALL.

I like it a lot too. For my money, this is up there with Woody Allen's five star work. This is up there with HANNAH AND HER SISTERS, CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS, MIDNIGHT IN PARIS and all that. Allen would continue to try and mix comedy with deeper ideas. But the mix of this one is really great.

It's amazing how Allen sets up a bunch of chaos at the start and just let's them all run their course. But it is a putting-on-a-show film that gets derailed by the great characters. The final show ends up not being what we remember - we remember the great characters, the laugh out loud moments and just the feel of the film.

Allen would make funnier films that would mix comedy with deeper ideas. He'll get it right again, but he gets it right here. I love how indie this feels with the long takes and natural performances that mixes with cartoonish characters and broad jokes.

This film swept the awards and was a box office hit. But for some reason it feels like it's not considered in that Woody Allen top tier. Ok, it's not groundbreaking cinema like ANNIE HALL or MANHATTAN. But for any other

director, like one who didn't have four or five films that changed the course of cinematic history, this would be a career high.

Fun facts

Some fun facts about BULLETS OVER BROADWAY. And look, let's get to the main one.

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY got a second life in 2014 as a musical. Over the years, Allen had gotten offers to adapt a musical from one of his films. Bullets was a suggestion, as was THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO and even ANNIE HALL. But Allen never likes to look back and turned down all the offers.

The pioneer for this is Allen's old colleague and occasional rival MEL BROOKS. Brooks had turned his film THE PRODUCERS into a successful musical. So successful that it became another feature film, this time with the songs. Brooks followed it up with a musical adaptation of his film YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN.

It also helped that Allen's old writing partner on ANNIE HALL and MANHATTAN, MARSHALL BRICKMAN, had written the book for JERSEY BOYS, another hugely successful musical. Allen and Brickman remain friends and they would talk about JERSEY BOYS, planting a seed in Allen to give a musical a try.

So after many decades, in 2014, the BULLETS OVER BROADWAY musical finally happened. SUSAN STROMAN was chosen to direct and do the choreography, something she had done for both THE PRODUCERS and YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN. Allen wrote the book, although it did not change much from the original script.

Allen also set the creative direction, being in charge of casting and the music. And in both, he made crucial decisions.

For casting, ZACH BRAFF was given the role of David Shayne. It was a good call - Braff was a star, who was the right kind of affable, and could play being overwhelmed. He had worked with Allen before, playing Allen's son in MANHATTAN MURDER MYSTERY in a very early role.

For the scene stealing turn of Helen Sinclair, every Broadway diva was fighting for the role. Broadway is full of Helen Sinclairs - the older, eccentric woman with a big, big voice. The role ultimately went to MARIN MASSIE, beating out legends like PATTI LUPONE and two divas who had appeared in Allen's films before - BETTY BUCKLEY and BERNADETTE PETERS. These are big stars who usually don't audition for anyone, but they auditioned for Allen.

The rest of the cast was rounded out by relative newcomers. One was NICK CORDERO, who would go on to be nominated for his first Tony Award in the role of Cheech. He was a stand out, beating out BOBBY CANNAVALE for the role (who recently starred in BLUE JASMINE). CHAZZ PALMINTERI, the original Cheech, and Cordero became friends. And then in 2016, Palminteri turned his 1993 film A BRONX TALE into a musical, and of course cast Cordero in the role of Sonny, the part Palminteri played in the film. Sadly, Cordero died of complications from COVID shortly before the recording of this episode.

If we skip to the end, the BULLETS OVER BROADWAY musical was not a runaway success and failed to match the runs of THE PRODUCERS or JERSEY BOYS. I mean, very few of them are, and Bullets earned its share of Tony Awards and ran for over 100 performances and went on tour around America and the world. But Broadway is fickle, and star power and critical acclaim are everything. I wonder if ZACH BRAFF was joined by BOBBY CANNAVALE and BERNADETTE PETERS and other huge stars on the marquee, what that would have meant for the show.

The other strange thing for the musical is the music choice. There was no original songs. Allen opting to use existing early 20th jazz songs, many of which had appeared in the original film. The songs, like UP A LAZY RIVER and LET'S MISBEHAVE are great in themselves. But I'm not sure how much it drew in audiences. JERSEY BOYS is a jukebox musical with reimagined version of big hits. THE PRODUCERS had new songs that were funny and fresh. BULLETS OVER BROADWAY had dated jazz standards. Yes they were arranged for the stage - but people were not queuing up to hear another version of LET'S MISBEHAVE.

The choice of being a jukebox musical is stranger because Allen often talked about wanting to do a proper musical, with proper composers. He had also done the jazz standards musical with EVERYONE SAYS I LOVE YOU in 1996. It's so hard to have a hit on Broadway. Everything has to work. And the music choices here just wasn't something that worked.

I never got to see the musical. Apparently they filmed a performance that has never been released. I would love to see it one day.

And now other fun facts.

THE SOPRANOS would premiere five years after the film's release in 1999. It's no surprise some of cast went on to star in that show, with all the gangsters and stuff. Notably TONY SIRICO and EDDIE FALCO. VINCENT PASTORE, who plays Big Pussy in THE SOPRANOS, would have a role in the BULLETS OVER BROADWAY musical.

And finally, this is the only time where Allen has taken someone else's work for the title of a film. BULLETS OVER BROADWAY was the name of 1955 sketch from the SID CAESAR SHOW. Allen worked for Sid a few years later, as a comedy

writer. Allen didn't just steal the title though - he did call Caesar and got his permission.

Wrap up

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

Next week - a film that was a huge success for Allen, that was two films in one.