In his new movie, *Midnight in Paris*, Woody Allen did what he does best. He created a character out of a city and added his signature sleight-of-hand magic. Think *Purple Rose of Cairo* when a handsome leading man stepped out of a screen to romance a depression-era Mia Farrow, or when *Zelig* appeared on the nightly news with the Pope and Calvin Coolidge.

*Midnight in Paris* reverberates with that same bracadabra — wish fulfillment — delivered by an auteur. “I always feel that only a magical solution can save us,” said Allen. “The human predicament is so tragic and so awful that, short of an act of magic, we’re doomed.”

Owen Wilson, born with the middle name Cunningham, seemed an odd choice to play Allen’s alter ego. Not only is he a goy, he was raised in Texas, not New York. “I knew I’d have to rewrite the script a bit,” Allen said, “but it was worth it.”

Wilson’s character, Gil, is like Allen in other ways. A successful American screenwriter filled with neurotic nostalgia-fueled musings, he romanticizes Paris the way Allen does Manhattan. Gil idealizes the Roaring 20s, the Golden Age. He imagines his heroes—F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein—writing their masterpieces in the City of Light with Cole Porter’s jazz resounding in the background.

Gil is engaged to Inez (Rachel McAdams), an unbearably shallow and domineering brat. Her father (Tom Hiddleston) is a staunch Tea-Party-Loving Republican snob. Fed-up with writing commercial schlock, Gil yearns to write a meaningful novel. This perturbs his fiancée Inez who wants him to stick with his shtick to keep big checks rolling in. Gil, a Romantic mostly-mensch with his head in the clouds, is the polar opposite. He’s a simple guy seeking meaning, squirrelly around pretentious wealth—a recurring theme in Allen’s movies.

Inez is such a pain in the tuchus it’s clear that their only link is an initial infatuation based on sex. Gil can no more recapture the joy than Alvy Singer could with lobsters in *Annie Hall*. Gil loves getting caught in the rain but Inez shrieks, worrying about her thousand dollar shoes. The disconnect between them is glaring.

The message, “Be true to yourself or you’ll be miserable,” may seem too on-the-nose and postcard shots of Paris too corny, but it all works.

Michael Sheen plays Paul, Inez’s ex-boyfriend, a pompous, arrogant twit who argues historical facts with a Paris tour guide (played by Carla Bruni-Sarcozy, the real First Lady of France). When Allen was questioned about hiring a woman with no acting experience he said, “I had a small part and I thought why not?”

Inez gobbles up Paul’s every word while Gil kvetches in disgust and dashes off to walk the streets of Paris. Paul delivers the movie’s subtext, “Nostalgia is denial, a flaw in the romantic imagination of people who find it difficult to cope with the present,” but Gil can’t hear through Paul’s haughty attitude. Instead Gil chases after beautiful, vulnerable Ariana (Marion Cotillard), a French muse, but in the time he spends with her it becomes clear she’s trapped in a mirror enigma—idolizing her golden era, La Belle Époque. The lesson learned is he cannot enjoy the present if fixated on the past.

Ernest Hemmingway (Corey Stoll), Salvador Dali (Adrien Brody) and Gertrude Stein (Kathy Bates) lighten things up and Gil gets his joyful walk in the rain. *Midnight in Paris* is pure Woody Allen, a Jewish genius masked behind Gil, his Gentile doppelganger. This film could easily secure Woody Allen’s 24th Oscar nom.

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