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MindGames
Inside

arts & ents

Film, Music & What's on
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'If I get
chapped lips
I immediately
think it's fatal'

Woody Allen on his night
fears about dying, career regrets
and plans for Sarah Palin.
Interview by Tim Teeman

Woody Allen

'At a certain age you conclude that greatness is not in you'

The icon trashes his talent, wonders why he's never cast in films and assures Tim Teeman that he's not a neurotic

In the chilly hush of a grand building on New York's Upper East Side lies Narnia of a sort: Woody Allen HQ, a windowless bunker where for the past 30 years the director has cast, edited and test-screened his films. There are cabinets down one side (containing the music on 33rpm vinyl he uses in his movies). A projection booth is concealed at one end of the room, a large white screen at the other. Allen enters, in white shirt and khaki trousers. He looks younger than the characters he played on screen more than a decade ago, his hair tidy, parted and sandy brown. It's only when he says "Let me put in my hearing aid so I can hear you" that you remember he is 74.

Allen doesn't appear in his new film, *Whatever Works* (reviewed on page 14). Larry David of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* plays "an emotional extension" of Allen, the director says. David's character, Boris, sees the world as irredeemably broken and his fellow humans as "greedy, cowardly, short-sighted worms". His marriage breaks down and he begins a relationship with a much younger woman, Melody, a street-dwelling Southern ingénue. After the London-set *Match Point* and the Spain of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *Whatever Works* marks a return to a familiarly whimsical New York canvas. American critics hated it ("*Whatever Works* doesn't" noted one succinctly), but old-school Allen fans will find it deliciously funny.

"Like Boris I have a grim view of the world," Allen says. "I fight it all the time. I've always been lucky: I've never experienced depression. I get sad and blue, but within a certain limit. I've always been able to work freely, to play my clarinet and enjoy women and sport — although I am always aware of the fact that I am operating within a nightmarish context that life itself is a cruel, meaningless, terrible kind of thing.

"God forbid the people who have bad luck, or even neutral luck, because even the luckiest, the most beautiful and brilliant, what have they got? A minuscule, meaningless life span in the grand scheme of things."

Wow, so the years of therapy were helpful, then. "People think I've spent my life on the couch because I've played that part so relentlessly in my nightclub act, on TV and in the movies. I've had therapy, but not an ungodly amount. I exaggerate it for laughs. One could even point to me as a decent advertisement for it. I've been productive all my life. I've never taken sleeping pills or an antidepressant. I've been married now for 13 years. I have two nice children and good relationships with practically all the past women I've been involved with. I have long-term friendships, business partners, I've been a fairly solid citizen. I'm not a crazy."

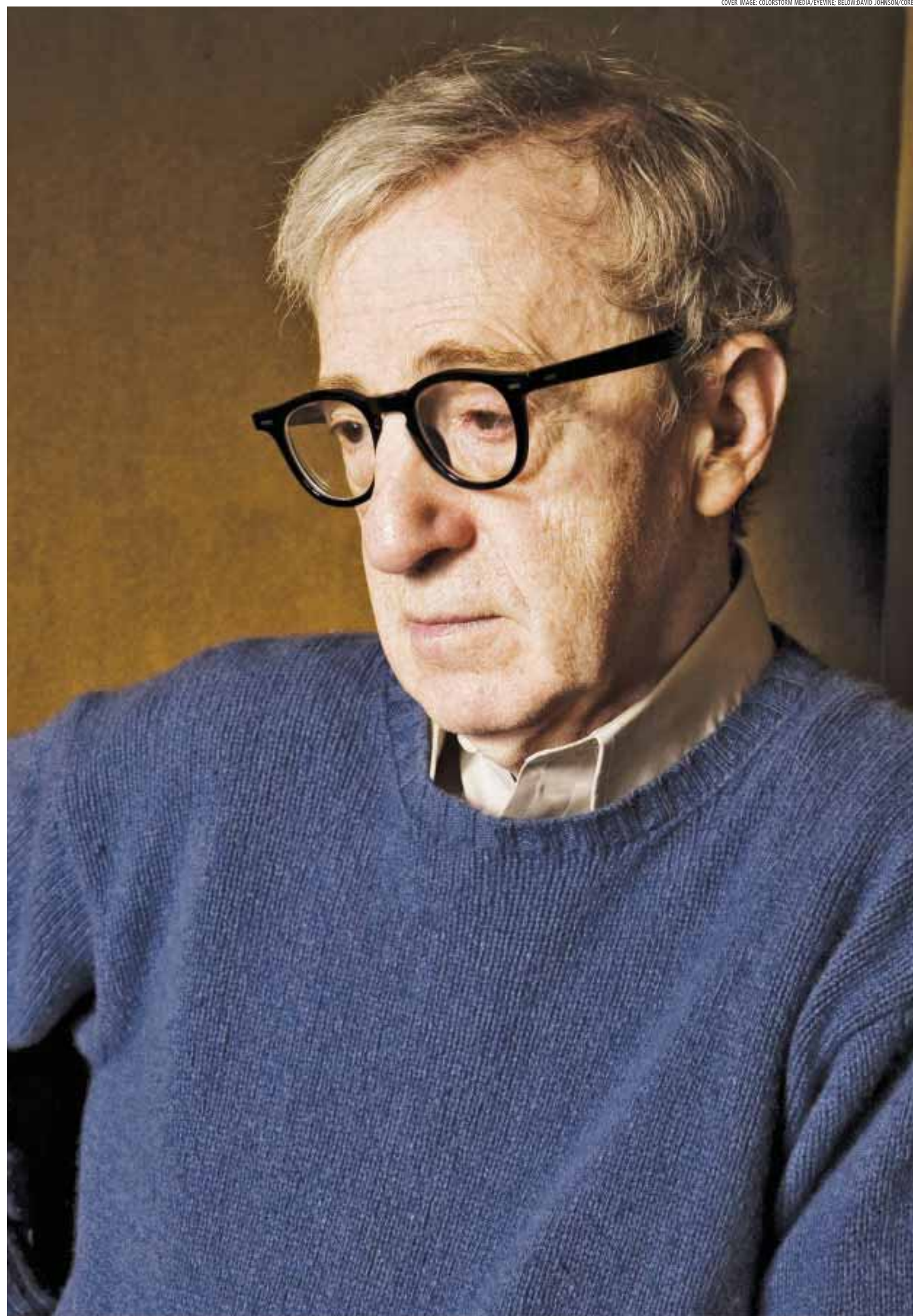
He pauses in this stout character reference. "Well, I'm claustrophobic; who wants to be stuck in a lift for three hours? But I don't brood on existential or personal terrors."

Instead he states them. At the Cannes Film Festival in May, presenting his latest film, *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, he noted there was "no advantage to getting older" and that he had no plans to cast himself in any future films because he felt too old. "You can imagine how frustrating it is when I do these movies with Scarlett Johansson and Naomi Watts and the younger guys get them, and I'm just the old guy, the director," he said.

What is it with Allen and age-gap movies, from *Manhattan* to *Whatever Works*, and more specifically casting younger muses? "The age gap thing doesn't interest me," Allen insists. "I've used it about three times. It's an easy comic gimmick. I've done a few films where I've played with time travel — *Sleeper* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, for example. People glom on to the age thing because I have a young wife and they feel there is an interesting or lurid connection to that, but there isn't."

Anyway, he adds, he can't play the leading man any more. "It's a shame, it's hard to find parts for myself. I'd like to. But I'm 74. When I was younger I was skirting the borderline because I was never a matinee idol. I got away with playing romantic parts because I was making jokes. But as the years go by you can't. You wouldn't want to see me and Scarlett Johansson, you'd rather see her with Javier Bardem — and so would I. Nobody wants to see a guy who's 74 hitting on a woman of any age. But I don't want to make geriatric movies about old people because they bore me too."

So let's dream up an older star for him to get it on with. How about Sarah Palin?



COVER IMAGE: COLORSTORM MEDIA/EYEVIEW; BELOW: DAVID JOHNSON/CORBIS

Uber-liberal film-maker gets it on with smokin' right-winger? "She's a colourful spice in the general recipe of democracy," Allen says, smiling. "She's a sexy woman. Yes. Me and Sarah — we could do a romance."

After his current film, *Midnight in Paris*, which he is filming this summer, he may make a political film, "less relevant to the problems we face, not set within this administration, but adjacent to it". He thinks Barack Obama is "doing a great job" and "as he gains some traction and some savvy — and stops being such a naïve little sweetheart — he'll get more things accomplished".

He would love to appear on screen again, he says forcefully. It could even be in a film he hadn't written, "but no one's ever offered me anything. In the same way people found parts for Walter Matthau when he got older because he was funny, you'd think they would find something for me."

Ageing seems to obsess him, I say. "Ageing, death: these things intrude upon you. When you get out of bed you find, 'Oh God my back hurts' and 'Oh God I've got a pain in the back of my neck'. You start to feel your age: it finds you. You're aware of death your whole life, constantly sweeping it under the rug and eventually it happens — you just have to hope as painlessly as possible. I once said in a movie that the nicest thing you could wish for is to say goodnight to your loved one, say 'We'll go to the museum tomorrow', then never wake up again."

When he dies, Allen says "I'd like to be cremated, and I want no fuss. I would not like a memorial by well-meaning friends, or to be mourned. I'd like to be forgotten as quickly as possible." He says this very tightly. "I don't want to be a burden on my children or my wife or anyone who takes an interest in such an event."

He wants his ashes scattered over Madison Avenue. Of New York, his eternal muse, he says: "I love it because I was brought up here. I'm attached to it."

He grew up in Brooklyn; a childhood, he says, that was "that cliché of: 'You're poor but you don't know it'. We didn't have any money but I didn't miss a meal. I was a good athlete. My parents were married for 60 years. I loved them but I wasn't close to my mother. She was a typical, complaining, Jewish mother and my father was like me, an easygoing, card-playing sports guy who took me to baseball and fishing."

Growing up, he wanted to be in showbusiness and became a gag writer in his teens. "I became a director out of necessity," he says. "I wrote my first script (*What's New Pussycat?*) and the studio badgered me. After that I felt I had to



Woody's New York

Annie Hall, 1977 The Thunderbolt rollercoaster, Coney Island

Alvy (Allen) wonders if the roots of his neurosis lie in growing up in a shaking home underneath a rollercoaster. The rollercoaster was the Thunderbolt, which opened in 1925. Scenes were filmed in a real house underneath the Thunderbolt, which closed in 1983 and was demolished in 2000.

Manhattan, 1979 Empire Diner, 10th Avenue, between West 22nd and West 23rd Streets

The legendary New York diner, which closed its doors in April, featured in the opening montage of Allen's potent hymn to his favourite city. Shot in black and white, it features landmarks including the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Allen and Diane Keaton's characters watch dawn breaking from Riverview Terrace at Sutton Square, beneath the Queensboro Bridge.

“ Sarah Palin is a colourful spice in the recipe of democracy. Me and Sarah — we could do a romance

become a director. In theatre, the writer is king. Film doesn't work that way."

Ever since then he has written and made his own films. "It's a great living," he says. "In my neighbourhood, half the kids turned out to be cab drivers, gangsters and low-lives, the other half lawyers, accountants and doctors. I wasn't a good student and I got into showbusiness because of luck. If I hadn't had that, or my talent, I would have been in the lower half. I would have had a menial job, like my father."

That said, if he could do it all over, he would have wanted to be a criminal lawyer, journalist or writer. "I would have been better off being a novelist than a director. At least at the end of two years you don't like your book you can throw it out, whereas I've got to put the film, and it could be the worst film in the world, out there."

Is he happy with his films? "No," he says firmly. "I've squandered an opportunity that people would kill for. I have had complete artistic freedom. Other directors don't get that in their lifetime. But I have a very poor record given the opportunities I've had. Out of 40 films I should have 30 masterpieces, eight noble failures and two embarrassments, but it hasn't worked out that way. Many of the films are enjoyable by the mean standards of movies, but look at what has been accomplished by people who have done beautiful things — Kurosawa, Bergman, Fellini, Buñuel, Truffaut — and then look at my films. I have squandered my opportunities and I have nobody to blame but myself."

This is said equably, not self-pityingly, or inviting soothing platitudes. "I can't blame a studio's interference. I used the actors, scripts and music I wanted. I cut them the way I wanted. Still they weren't great."

Quite a lot of people like his movies, I point out. "There are a few better than others, half a dozen, but it's a surprising paucity of worthwhile celluloid." (The six he prizes: *Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Match Point*, *Bullets Over Broadway*, *Zelig*, *Husbands and Wives* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*.) "You reach a certain age and you come to the conclusion that greatness is not in you," Allen says. "You aspired to greatness when you were younger, but either through lack of industry or lack of discipline or simply lack of genius you didn't achieve greatness. The years go by and you realise: 'I'm this mid-level guy.' I did the best I could."

He notes my slightly stricken expression. "It's not hard to accept. I didn't compromise or sell out, but I've never achieved what I hoped to."

But his standing is so high. "I see myself from my own glass enclosure," he says. "I'm no longer the victim of fantasies of 'Some day I'm going to make *Citizen Kane*

Broadway Danny Rose, 1984 Carnegie Deli, 854 9th Avenue at 55th Street

The Carnegie is an Allen favourite. In the film, it is where a group of comedians gather to swap stories about Danny Rose (Allen), a slightly useless talent agent. The Carnegie is best known for its big, meaty sandwiches; its motto: "If you can finish your meal, we've done something wrong."

Hannah and Her Sisters, 1986 The St Regis New York, 2 East 55th Street at 5th Avenue

Elliot (Michael Caine) and Lee (Barbara Hershey) conduct their clandestine affair at this plush hotel. The film used many other city locations, including the Langham apartment building at 135 Central Park West, where Hannah (Mia Farrow) held her Thanksgiving suppers.

Mighty Aphrodite, 1995 FAO Schwarz, 767 5th Avenue at 58th Street

The famous toy shop features in the final scene where Lenny (Allen) and Linda

and *Bicycle Thieves* and these will be the greatest films ever made and every young film-maker will copy my style'. I have a peaceful, resigned feeling about it. I didn't lose anyone money, I didn't go to Hollywood and make junk. I didn't try to curry favour with the audience or critics. I tried to make good work. Unfortunately my best isn't Fellini's best."

Would he ever give up? "No, it's a good distraction for me. If I gave up, I'd be sitting at home thinking about my mortality."

As for regrets, he wonders if he didn't try hard enough on some projects, or that maybe he should have stayed at college, got a better education and done a different job, or "at least become a deeper artist". He worries that he stayed in the odd relationship for too long (he won't say which ones, but Mia Farrow presumably) and didn't pursue others that might have made him happy.

What about Soon-Yi and all that happened when they got together when she was 22 and he 56? Farrow had discovered nude pictures of her that Allen had taken and, after a court case over custody of the couple's three children (one biological, two adopted), Allen's conduct was called "grossly inappropriate" by the judge, who denied him visiting rights to one of his adopted children. Allen is at his most sure and vehement over this. "Oh, I have no regrets about *that*," he says dismissively. "I fell in love with Soon-Yi and it was no one's business but mine. The court case never bothered me for a second, I worked through that and my lawyers dealt with what they had to deal with." He pauses and laughs. "That *that* should have been worst the thing that happened to me..."

What about other people's outrage about the relationship? "It didn't bother me in the slightest. The fact that the public was up in arms that I was in love with Soon-Yi was less than zero to me. I went with her, married her, I have a great marriage with her, I have two kids [Bechet and Manzie, both adopted]. I do not accept anyone's credentials to have any opinion about it."

"I worked steadily through it all, I made movies, played with my band, toured the world. But a spot on my skin, an unexplainable pain someplace — those kinds of things cause me anxiety. I instantly go to a doctor. It's like Ailments Anonymous. People think I'm a hypochondriac, but I'm not. I'm an alarmist." But he's never had a serious illness. "No. And my mother lived to 96, my father to nearly 100, and if I get chapped lips I immediately think it's fatal. He is smiling, but not joking."

Whatever Works opens tomorrow



(Mira Sorvino), the prostitute, porn star and mother of his adopted son have a chance encounter. The shop also featured in *Big*, where Tom Hanks and Robert Loggia danced a duet on its 22ft piano.

Whatever Works, 2009 Battery Park

At the southern tip of Manhattan facing the harbour, this is where supergroup Boris (Larry David) has one of his many conversations about life and purpose with Melody (Evan Rachel Wood, pictured). If you'd like to tour Allen's New York locations, see www.screenstours.com/woody-allen-new-york-city