

The physician at the movies

Peter E. Dans, MD



Owen Wilson in *Midnight in Paris*. © Sony Pictures Classics.

Midnight in Paris

Starring Owen Wilson, Rachel McAdams, Marion Cotillard, Kathy Bates, and Adrien Brody.

Written and directed by Woody Allen. Rated PG-13. Running time 94 minutes.

Midnight in Paris, which may be characterized as *Purple Rose of Cairo* meets *Manhattan*, represents a return to the form Woody Allen displayed in some of my favorite Allen films: *Play it Again Sam*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *Love and Death*, *Manhattan*, and *Annie Hall*. It's hard to believe that he has written and directed over forty films since writing the screenplay for *What's New Pussycat?* in 1965 and then taking over as director as well as screenwriter for *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* the following year.

Despite his shunning of the Oscar ceremonies except on two occasions, he has received twenty-one nominations and three Academy Awards. Fifteen actors have received Oscar nominations and five actors have won Oscars for performances in his films:

Diane Keaton as the unforgettable Annie Hall; Michael Caine and Dianne Weist for the

angst-ridden *Hannah and Her Sisters*; Dianne Weist again, this time as a gangster's talentless moll in the witless *Bullets over Broadway*; Mira Sorvino as that hardy Oscar-winning perennial, the heart of gold prostitute in another silly contrivance, *Mighty Aphrodite*; and Penelope Cruz as the tempestuous ex-wife in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. That helps explain why, despite his sordid personal life, actors are excited to work with him. Starting as a comedy writer (especially for the inimitable Sid Caesar), a standup comic, and an essayist for the *New Yorker*, much of Allen's work has been autobiographical and psychoanalytic in nature, no doubt drawing heavily on his estimated thirty years in analysis.

Midnight in Paris has a lightness and good humor that has been missing in many of his later films and, as a result, in five weeks, it became the highest grossing of any of his films in North America. It opens by treating the viewer to an homage to Paris to the strains of saxophonist Sidney Behcet's, "Si tu vois ma mere," similar to his great cinematographic paean to New York City in *Manhattan*. Unlike the latter, it was not shot on-site but involves what appears to be a series of picture postcard views that show Paris to advantage as the City of Light both in day and in night, as well as in the rain. I have



visited Paris three times, and the sequence brought back a flood of happy memories. Ironically, the film's major theme is to live in the present and not subsist on nostalgia for a past or golden age that may never have existed.

The Woody-proxy is played very well by a surprising choice, Owen Wilson, better known for more broad comedy as a slacker or a surfer dude. Here he sensitively carries off the role of Gil, a screenwriter who, although well paid, aspires to be a novelist but is suffering from writer's block. He and his fiancée Inez (Rachel McAdams) are visiting Paris with her parents John (Kurt Fuller) and Helen (Mimi Kennedy). Inez is a shallow materialistic princess and her parents are the stereotypical wealthy and obnoxious Americans. They clearly inhabit a different planet than Gil does. They want to go shopping and sightseeing. Gil would rather search for the Paris of the 1920s, where he and Inez might reside while he conquers his writer's block. She wants none of that. This trio represents a movie set-up to get us on Gil's side and is the weakest part of the film. Fortunately we don't see them much except as brief bridges between Gil's visits to the past.

On a sightseeing expedition to Versailles, their estrangement surfaces as Inez becomes attracted to her college hero Paul (Michael Sheen), a pedantic pompous ass. When Paul suggests that Gil and Inez join him and Carol (Nina Arlanda) that evening to go dancing, Gil opts to stay in the hotel. Going out for walk, he hears midnight strike and all of a sudden F. Scott Fitzgerald (Tom Hiddleston) and wife Zelda (Alison Pill) pick him up in a 1920s roadster and he time travels to the world he seeks. There he meets Ernest Hemingway (Corey Stoll), who amusingly declaims his work, and Gertrude Stein (Kathy Bates), who agrees to read his manuscript. He also meets Salvador Dali, played wildly over-the-top by Adrien Brody, as well as Pablo Picasso (Marcial Di Fonzo Bo) and his mistress Adriana (Marion Cotillard). When the latter split, a thoroughly besotted Gil hopes to stay with Adriana in that world, but it turns out that her concept of a golden age is *La Belle Epoque*, to which they then time travel. There she introduces him to the Paris of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Gauguin, and Edgar Degas, a world in which he feels less at home. Mix in Man Ray, T. S. Eliot, Luis Buñuel, Jean Cocteau, Henri Matisse, Cole Porter at the piano, and the dancers at Maxim's and you have an very appetizing artistic bouillabaisse. The screenwriting is vintage Woody Allen: clever, literate, and funny. Watch for Carla Bruni, the wife of French president Nicolas Sarkozy as a sympathetic museum guide.

As to Allen's thesis about a golden age, by chance, shortly after seeing the film, I listened to the audiotape of David McCullough's new book, *A Greater Journey*,¹ about Americans who went to study and experience Paris from the 1830s to 1900. It too has a heady assortment of famous characters starting with James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Sumner, and Samuel F. B. Morse, and ending with Augustus Saint-Gaudens. McCullough makes clear that Paris had a series of golden

ages besides those pictured in the film. For example, he devotes considerable space to "*Paris medicale*" with its *École de Médecine*, and numerous hospitals and illustrious physicians like Guillaume Dupuytren and Philippe Ricord, and especially Pierre Louis. He makes a good case for the period from 1832 to 1860 as being Paris's golden age of medicine that attracted the likes of Bostonians Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Jackson, Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, and John Collins Warren, who made extended stays there, becoming exposed to a different form of medicine, which they then brought back to the United States to create our own golden age. McCullough quotes Osler as saying in the 1890s that "modern scientific medicine had had its rise in France in the early days of this century. More than any others, it was the pupils of Pierre Louis who gave the impetus to the scientific study of medicine in the United States."

Yet, as much as one would be thrilled to study under Louis, one would not want to inhabit a golden age of medicine in Paris before anesthesia and asepsis. In fact, the professional jealousies and political turmoil in France were such that by Osler's time the place to go was Vienna or Berlin, which were superseded by the United States in the twentieth century. It led me to reflect on how fortunate I was to be trained in the period of the 1950s and 1960s in what might be called the Golden Age of Internal Medicine (before it splintered into subspecialties) that included exposure at Columbia to David Seegal, Arthur Wertheim, Dana Atchley, and the physicians recruited by Robert Loeb; at Hopkins to Mac Harvey and his faculty, including Victor McKusick, Leigh Cluff, Lock Conley, and Dick Ross; at the Thorndike to Max Finland, Ed Kass, and Lou Weinstein; and later to Gordon Meiklejohn and Paul Beeson. I might have hoped that my daughter and other recently minted physicians could have been exposed to the likes of them. Yet, like the Paris of Louis, I wouldn't want them for their patients' sake to linger long in that era, given how little we could do for patients in too many areas compared with today. In short, what Allen may be saying is that we can't go back to that golden age, nor should we want to, but must make of the present our own golden age.

Addendum: I can't resist giving a plug for AQA's *Leaders in American Medicine* series, endowed by David Seegal.² It's a set of video interviews with past "giants" of medicine, some of which have been discussed in *The Pharos* by Oliver Owen,³⁻⁸ and which can provide some interesting course material for both history of medicine and clinical skills.

References

1. McCullough D. *The Greater Journey*. New York: Simon and Schuster; 2011.
2. *Leaders in American Medicine*. alphaomegaalpha.org/leaders.html.
3. Owen OE. Robert H. Williams, M.D. *The Pharos* Fall 1998: 42-43.



Kristin Scott Thomas in *Sarah's Key*. Photofest. © Weinstein Company.

4. Owen OE. Russel V. Lee, M.D. *The Pharos Summer 1999*; 46–47.
5. Owen OE, Avery ME. Gertrude B. Elion, D.Sc. (Hon.), 1918–1999. *The Pharos Summer 2000*; 35–39.
6. Owen OE. David M. Kipnis, M.D. *The Pharos Summer 2001*; 19–20.
7. Owen OE. David C. Sabiston, Jr., M.D. *The Pharos Winter 2002*; 36–38.
8. Owen OE. Matthew Walker, M.D. *The Pharos Spring 2003*; 20–23.

Sarah's Key

Starring Kristen Scott Thomas, Melusine Mayance, and Aidan Quinn.

Directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner. **Rated** PG-13. **Running time** 111 minutes.

Sarah's Key is based on a novel of the same name written by Tatiana de Rosnay.¹ It tells the story of a July 1942 round-up in which the French police arrested 13,152 Jews, including 5,802 women and 4,051 children. They were detained for days in the Vélodrome d'Hiver or Vél d'Hiv, an arena built for winter indoor bicycle racing, before being deported to an internment camp and then on to Auschwitz. De Rosnay's manuscript was rejected by over twenty publishers. Finally, when published years later, it sold over five million copies and has been released in thirty-eight countries.² It's a good example of why one must

be persistent and believe in one's work. Having had the same number of rejections for two of my books before acceptance, I can relate, but obviously not to its economic and artistic success.

The movie opens on a happy note in an apartment in the Marais, the predominantly Jewish quarter of Paris. Young Sarah Starzynski (Mélusine Mayance) and her little brother Michel are tickling one another and giggling under the covers when they are interrupted by the police at the door. Having rounded up almost 4,000 men on May 10, 1941, the French have been directed by their German overseers to conduct a round-up of women and children. Before leaving the apartment, Sarah and her mother are allowed to take a blanket, a sweater, a pair of shoes, and two shirts. Sarah tells Michel to wait in the closet until they return. She gives him food and water, locks the closet, and holds on to the key. In the street, they are joined by the father who is not very happy with Sarah's decision but is prevented from re-entering the house.

At the Vél d'Hiv, they are all herded together in a facility with only ten lavatories (all of which were sealed to prevent escape) and one water tap.² The sun coming through the glass skylight combined with the body heat from so many prisoners made it so unbearably hot that some committed suicide or went mad. Some Quakers, Red Cross workers, and a few doctors were allowed in but they could do little to relieve the suffering.²

Sarah escapes with a friend from the children's section of



Left, Mélusine Mayance in *Sarah's Key*. Photofest. © Weinstein Company.

the internment camp with the help of a guard who had allowed her to keep an apple and her key during previous encounters. They run for their lives and finally arrive at a small cottage where an elderly couple refuses to take them in. They sleep with the dog and the next day, the man, seeing that her companion is desperately ill, gives them shelter. At first, he decides not to get medical aid because the town doctor is on holiday and his substitute is a collaborator. Finally, he does call the doctor who arrives with a German SS officer. The child dies of diphtheria. The German officer wants to know if there's anyone else there and the old man asks him if he would have called them if there were.

Sarah then convinces the couple to take her to Paris to check the apartment and to let her brother out of the closet. The film goes back and forth between the present and past focusing on journalist Julia Jarmond (Kristin Scott Thomas) who is writing an article about the Vél d'Hiv atrocity. Coincidentally her husband is related to the family that took over the apartment shortly after the Starzynskis were forcibly evicted and they are renovating it to live there. As Jarmond tries to learn what happened to Sarah and what her in-laws knew, the search leads her to Brooklyn, Florence, back to Paris, and then Manhattan. I'll leave it there but I will add that a friend who accompanied me to the screening said that the film reminded him of *Sophie's Choice*. He has a good point, especially with regard to the effects on Sarah of her well-meaning spontaneous decision and her survivor guilt.

The film is very well done. There is a lot of French dialogue with excellent subtitles in addition to the English, as well as a sprinkling of German and Italian (which are not translated). Scott-Thomas does a great job in tying together the many threads in the different storylines, and the girl playing Sarah is outstanding. The film could have been shortened, especially towards the end where it starts to drag to heighten the suspense

about "surprises" that turn out not to be so surprising. The portrayal of Julia's husband Bertrand Tezac (Michel Duchessey) is rather hard to believe. His late hours and lack of attention to his wife while trying to close a deal with the Chinese are totally believable. What is not is his reaction to her happiness about being pregnant. After having gone through fertility treatments to have what they called "a miracle baby" and now having one naturally, his adamant stance on her having an abortion surprises the viewer as much as it does Julia. Finally, the first scene in which Julia meets Sarah's son William Rainsferd (Aidan Quinn) in Florence doesn't ring true, especially in contrast to

their second meeting at the Tavern on the Green, which concludes the film. Whatever the case, these are minor flaws in a picture well worth seeing, especially since these tragic and heinous events are so little-known.

Addendum: The Vél d'Hiv round-up accounted for more than a quarter of the 42,000 Jews sent from France to Auschwitz in 1942, of whom only a little over 800 were said to have returned to France at the end of the war. It wasn't until 1995 that Jacques Chirac acknowledged the guilt of the French police for collaborating with the Germans and issued an apology.

References

1. De Rosnay T. *Sarah's Key* (Movie Tie-In). New York: St. Martin's Griffin; 2011.
2. Dodes R. Film: *Sarah's Key: The Hit No One Wanted*. Wall Street J 2011 Jul 15. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405270230491104576444453903049990.html>.

Great Expectations (1946)

Starring Jean Simmons, John Mills, Francis L. Sullivan, Martita Hunt, Finlay Currie, Alec Guinness, and Valerie Hobson.
Directed by David Lean. Unrated. B&W. Running time 118 minutes.

In June, Turner Classic Movies had a Jean Simmons retrospective and I taped this classic. Given the dearth of quality films in today's theaters, I decided to review it. *Great Expectations*, which was beaten out by *Gentleman's Agreement* for the 1947 Oscar for Best Picture, is another top drawer J. Arthur Rank production started off by their hardest-working employee striking the gong. The director is David Lean, who went on to direct such memorable films as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Summertime*, *Doctor Zhivago*,

The physician at the movies

and *A Passage to India*, among others. Lean and his co-screenwriters did an extraordinary job in distilling Dickens' sprawling narrative and communicating the essential story without sacrificing the richness of the characters. It helped that the cast was a virtual Who's Who of British character actors, many of whom had acted in previous adaptations of the book for the screen and stage. Though color was available, Lean wisely chose to film in black and white, just as Carol Reed did in filming *The Third Man* in 1949.

The book was the next-to-last of Dickens' novels. At the time, Dickens was having problems sustaining his literary magazine *All The Year Round*. The author who had supplied him with two chapters of a novel each week for serialization had done great work, but this time his story was a dud and sales were down. So Dickens decided to use a story he had sketched out to publish elsewhere for bigger payments. Serializing novels often encouraged authors to pad the writing, especially when getting paid by the word. Yet with a writer of Dickens' caliber, much of the filler enriches the characterization while stringing the reader along so he or she could not wait for the next installment. Dickens was so popular in the United States that some people waited at the dock to meet the ship from England to get the latest installment. This serialization ran from December 1, 1860, to August 3, 1861, allowing him to incorporate readers' comments, including that of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the author of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, who suggested that he change the original downbeat ending to a "more acceptable" one.¹

Like the book, the film is narrated by the central character Philip Pirrip, Pip (Tony Wager), an orphan boy who is being raised by his sister, Mrs. Joe (Freda Jackson), and her husband, Joe Gargery (Bernard Miles), a blacksmith. The opening is one of the greatest scenes in cinematic history, which the Motion Picture Academy acknowledged by awarding the film Oscars for Best Cinematography and Art Direction. Pip is visiting the graves of his father and mother in the marsh country of England. It's "a dark and stormy" night, the wind is howling, and a prison ship lies at anchor nearby. Suddenly, Pip is accosted by escaped convict Abel Magwitch, played with gruff menace by Finlay Currie (who would later portray a quite different character, Saint Peter, in *Quo Vadis*, another classic film). When Magwitch ascertains that the boy lives with a blacksmith nearby, he orders him to bring him a file to remove his leg

irons, as well as "wittles" (victuals), or he will tear out his heart and liver, and roast and eat them.

When Pip returns home, he learns that his sister has been looking for him. She beats him with a switch, which she also administers to her husband (a classic spouse and child abuser). The next morning before daybreak, Pip sneaks out with a file, some brandy, victuals, and a pot pie. He is so fearful that he thinks he hears the cows and sheep calling out at his perfidy. He manages to see the convict, but not before he sees another escapee, a sworn enemy of Magwitch. After Magwitch is refreshed, the boy asks him if he wants to share the rest with his brother escapee. Magwitch flies into a rage and seeks out the other and, at the risk of being caught, he sets upon him. This easily allows the soldiers in a search party to apprehend them. Before Magwitch boards the boat, he makes sure to say that he stole the food so as to protect Pip.

Shortly thereafter, Pip's Uncle Pumblechook (Hay Petrie) is asked by his landlady, the very eccentric Miss Havisham (Martita Hunt), if he knows of a boy who could play with her ward Estella (Jean Simmons). Miss Havisham has been living in the same house since she was jilted on her wedding day. All the clocks have stopped at twenty to nine and all the wedding trappings have been left as they were. This rejection engendered such an antipathy to men that her request that Pip come and play with her ward is part of her training Estella to break men's



Finlay Currie and Anthony Water in *Great Expectations* (1946).

© General Film Distributors/Photofest. Photographer: Cyril Sanborough.

hearts. Simmons is excellent as the beautiful but malicious Estella, whom Pip describes as “proud,” “pretty,” and “insulting,” although he is mesmerized by her. When he confesses on the next visit that she is not as insulting, she slaps him and then asks what he thinks now. Later, she allows him to kiss her before turning him out. The visits continue until they reach fourteen, when Ms. Havisham sends Estella off to France for finishing school and Pip starts his apprenticeship with Joe, who, though illiterate and uneducated, is the noblest and most warmhearted character in the story.

Six years pass, when Miss Havisham’s lawyer, Mr. Jaggers, played with gusto by Francis L. Sullivan, arrives to tell Pip that he has “great expectations” in that an anonymous donor has set up a fund for him to be educated as a gentleman. The post horn sounds and a carriage sets off for London with the twenty-year-old Pip dressed up and wearing an expression of wonder as he embarks on this new adventure. The actor who played Pip as a child is replaced by a young John Mills, who went on to a long career in film and was the father of Hayley and Juliet Mills. He is a more fresh-faced tenderfoot than one would expect from someone who has worked as a blacksmith for six years.

Pip is reunited with Herbert Pocket (Alec Guinness), whom he had encountered at Miss Havisham’s. Herbert is now his roommate and unofficial mentor on manners and how an affluent dandy should act. As he absorbs those manners and an education, he becomes in his own words “a snob” who is embarrassed when Joe visits him in London. Despite feeling guilty at his shoddy treatment of Joe, Pip decides not to stay at his old home at the Forge on a visit, but at the Blue Boar Inn “where people of quality stay.”

Pip visits Miss Havisham who, he is convinced, is his benefactress. Miss Havisham tells him that “if Estella favors you, love her; if she tears your heart to pieces, love her.” Estella, who is back from France, re-enters his life in the person of actress Valerie Hobson, who is a distinct change from Jean Simmons. Although she’s still disdainful of the lovesick Pip, saying, “You meant nothing to me. You must know, Pip, I have no heart,” somehow she does not have the edge, haughtiness, and, yes, venom that Simmons conveyed. It’s almost like the game has lost its allure and she wants to protect him from herself. He still is attracted to her and tries to win her heart but she is betrothed to someone else. The story unfolds in a very interesting manner when the convicts re-enter the picture and provide new links to the principals. Let’s leave it there, except to say that the ending is even brighter than the book’s revised ending.

Maybe, like me, you’ll wonder what Miss Havisham’s room must have smelled like with the rats running around a place that had not seen the sun all those years while Pip and Estella were growing up. In a sense, it’s like those Gothic novels where



Martita Hunt plays Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1946).

© General Film Distributors/Photofest. Photographer: Cyril Stanborough.

you’re not supposed to really think very much about their absurdity and to just allow yourself to be caught up in the story and the performances. It’s easy to see how this captivated readers at the time, to be fed only two chapters and then be left like the old-time movie serials waiting for the next installment. The film is definitely worth putting on your Netflix list, and if you are inclined to read the book, you may wish as I did to locate a copy of the very beautifully read compact disc version.² Be forewarned, though, it consists of sixteen discs.

References

1. Dickens C. *Great Expectations*. New York: Random House; 2003.
2. Dickens C. *Great Expectations* (The Classic Collection). Read by Michael Page. Grand Rapids (MI): Brilliance Audio; 1997.

Dr. Dans (AΩA, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1960) is a member of *The Pharos’s* editorial board and has been its film critic since 1990. His address is:

11 Hickory Hill Road
Cockeysville, Maryland 21030
E-mail: pdans@comcast.net