# “She's a Genius, and I Don't Use That Word Casually”:

# Elaine May’s Collaborative Relationship with Woody Allen

Martin Hall

Woody Allen’s work often deals with intimate portraits of women. Maureen Dowd has pointed out that, ‘as a writer, Woody Allen creates rare female roles, and, as a director, he draws rare performances from his actresses and makes them look original and enticing’ (1986). Interviewing Carrie Fisher for her role in *Hannah and her Sisters* (1986), Dowd reports, ‘Around someone like Woody Allen – and there are not many people like him – you want to be at your best”’ (1986).

 Overlooked, however, is the impact of Elaine May on the work of Woody Allen both on-screen and on-stage. Elaine May is a singular creative force who augments the work of anyone with whom she collaborates, but for the films in which she has acted for Allen, her authorship has a tendency to stand out from the filmmaker himself. May has acted twice with Allen, first in 2000’s *Small Time Crooks,* about which Richard Schickel observed that the comedy here is ‘mostly supplied by Elaine May’s radical innocence’ (2003: 59), and again in *Crisis in Six Scenes* (2016)*.* Sharing a manager in Jack Rollins, Allen was well aware of May’s early comedy work, describing the inimitable ‘Nichols and May’ duo as, ‘a brilliant comedy team, very perceptive and gifted’ (qtd in Kelley, 1976: 18). Having previously collaborated with Woody Allen and David Mamet to produce a series of three one-act plays in *Death Defying Acts* (1995),Elaine May later wrote the single act play, *George is Dead,* performed alongside Allen’s *Honeymoon Motel,* and Ethan Coen’s *Talking Cure,* as part of the three-act *Relatively Speaking* (2011). This chapter surveys these direct interactions which Elaine May and Woody Allen have had, and through these case studies suggests that the extensive cross-over influence reaches a point of creative collaboration.

From influencer to actress to collaborator, this chapter analyses the evident impact which May has had on the work of Allen. This chapter considers May and Allen’s previous work with other collaborators – both Mike Nichols and Marshall Brickman respectively – in addition to their work together. More significantly, the thesis of the argument builds a case to explore the extent to which an actor’s performance can be considered authored, and will encompass an understanding of authorship in order to better identify the role of collaborators in creative production. As will be discussed, there are many difficulties in describing a director/actress relationship as a ‘collaboration’, and as such I work from Vera John-Steiner’s definition of, ‘the interdependence of thinkers in the co-construction of knowledge’ (2000: 4).

## Authorship

Examining differing modes of authorship are necessary when making a case for any sense of an authorship to be attributed to one individual throughout highly collaborative media such as cinema and television. Primarily, audiences and scholars alike lean upon the individual authorship model of the ‘auteur theory’, pioneered by French film critics and theorists of the French *Nouvelle Vague.* In the *Cahiers du Cinéma* journal, Bazin wrote that, ‘the *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard reference, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next’ (1957: 255). That is to say that an *auteur* is an artist whose films consistently bear, ‘the personal stamp of the auteur’ (255). This chapter seeks to discern who precisely it is in this collaborative process who can be designated as the ‘artist’.

 Richard Dyer explores further notions of authorship and considers the following three perspectives: ‘multiple authorship’, which argues that ‘a film text is composed of many different authorial ‘voices’’ (2009: 151); ‘collective authorship’, wherein, ‘a group of people working closely together constitute a team who are properly thought of as the author of the film’ (151); and ‘corporate authorship’ whereby ‘organisations or social structures that produce films are the authors of them’ (152). When arguing for May’s role as ‘author’ of the films in which she stars, Dyer’s fourth system, ‘stars as authors’ is most significant. Here, building upon the notion of the *auteur* theoryDyer posits that this ‘recognisable stamp’ may just as well come from an actor as from a director. Dyer refers to McGilligan’s study of James Cagney in which he writes that, ‘under certain circumstances, an actor may influence a film as much as a writer, director or producer’ (qtd in Dyer, 2009: 199), and argues:

When the performer becomes so important to a production that he or she changes lines, adlibs, shifts meaning, influences the narrative and style of a film and altogether signifies something clear-cut to audiences despite the intent of writers and directors, then the acting of that person assumes the force, style and integrity of an auteur (199).

 This chapter then, in the study of a writer, director and actress so set on improvisation and ad-libbing, claims that May, beyond her veritable writing collaborations with Woody Allen, in her simple on-screen presence, stands as the author of her performances and therefore can be seen as having functioned collaboratively on the production of *Small Time Crooks* and *Crisis in Six Scenes.*

When exploring a theory of collaborative partnerships, it is important to consider the varying manifestation of these kinds of relationships. John-Steiner argues for a duality in collaboration in which partnerships function as either ‘*integrative collaboration’* or ‘*complementary*modes of collaboration’ (2000: 96). *‘Integrative’* collaborations, for John-Steiner, arise when, ‘[a]rtists working together combine their different perspectives and their shared passion to shed the familiar’ (2000: 96), whereas, *complementary* modes are expressed when artists with different skills, training, or backgrounds, divide labour in order to produce something together. Both partnerships – Nichols and May, and Allen and Brickman – were explicitly collaborative in that two creative individuals produced work as a unit. The collaborative screenplays of Allen and Brickman were discernibly integrative*,* demonstrating this shared passion and not a harmonising of skills which complement one another. Nichols and May on the other hand, functioned as complementary collaborators. Regarding their seamlessly symbiotic and complementary working relationship, Nachman describes this as, ‘Their great strength – the complimentary yin and yang that welded their work’ (2003: 337).

## Collaborative Success

John-Steiner asks the question, ‘Do some partnerships have too much interdependence, and consequently experience a painful separation after the period of fusion?’ (2000: 81-82). It seems, indeed, that this was the case with Nichols and May. Whilst their relationship ended seemingly copacetic, May’s solo career hit rocky ground without the interdependence of one another. May’s *Ishtar* (1987) was described as a ‘megabudget flop’ by *The* *New York Times* (Caryn, 2006)*,* where Nichols’ work was more regularly award-winning and more successful, although he did produce some failures later in his career. Perhaps this is the marker of success for Woody Allen and his collaborations; unlike the case with Nichols and May, Allen’s work with Brickman was short lived and his work with May, too, lasted through only four products. These collaborations were fruitful and successful but the writer/director then moved on to other projects, effectively side stepping this potential for ‘too much interdependence’.

 Whilst the Nichols and May partnership, owing to its impact, might seem to have lasted decades, it lasted only four years, and unexpectedly dissolved at the height of their fame, in 1961. The pair were described as, ‘the leading social satirists of their generation, a title never seriously threatened in the forty years of sketch comedy since’ (Nachman, 2003: 319). An alternative understanding of the Nichols and May partnership comes from Nichols himself, when he suggested that, “We weren’t really a comedy team. Elaine and I kept thinking we’d be found out. We developed an act without really meaning to. We were actors, writers, and directors, all at once” (qtd in Nachman, 2003: 321). This is quite possibly the success of the partnership; the feeling of natural fluidity and organic influence. Their acts were never contrived and this is evident in the work itself, in the duo’s use of improvisation. Nachman, in his book *Seriously Funny:* *Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* suggests that this improvisational fluidity – so vital and natural to May – became the downfall of the comedy team, arguing that this complementary mode of collaboration was the very thing that, ‘ultimately led to their undoing’ (2003: 337), and highlighting the polarising experience of Nichols’ controlling aversion to May’s natural, freewheeling improvisation.

Interestingly, it is this element of play and improvisation and May’s penchant for exploring ideas as a scene progressed in particular, which aligns her with the work of Woody Allen. In acknowledging, as did Michael Chekhov, that, ‘every role offers an actor the opportunity to improvise, to collaborate and truly co-create with the author and director’ (2002: 36), it is possible to read May’s acting within the work of Allen as a form of ‘authorship’, as the co-construction of meaning, and thus, collaboration. In her work on role-play and authorship, Celia Pearce describes the former as, ‘a form of what I call “emergent authorship,” a bottom-up, procedural process leading to co-created, unexpected narrative outcomes’ (2016: 445). May excelled at this role-play and performative improvisation, perhaps even to a fault, as her manager Jack Rollins, observed, ‘Elaine would go on forever if you let her. She is insanely creative, but she had no sense when to quit’ (qtd in Nachman, 2003: 342). This notion of relentlessness in May’s approach to performance is further characterized by Nachman who saw Nichols and May as, ‘less a comedy duo than a wry duet, verbal comic musicians jamming with each other’ (2003: 322). This idea of a ‘jamming’ and interdependent co-creation well-describes the interrelation between not just Nichols and May but also Allen and May; a suitably musical metaphor which chimes neatly with Allen, a musician himself.

## Long-time Collaborators

 Despite being a solo stage performer in the 1950s and 1960s, a collaborative approach evidently comes naturally to Allen who had a decades-long collaboration with Brickman, with whom he wrote *Sleeper* (1973), *Annie Hall* (1977)*, Manhattan* (1979)*,* and *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993). In addition to working successfully with Brickman, Allen is known for having ‘borrowed’ from the work of others, even, one might argue, the work of Elaine May. Allen has spoken of his collaborative work with Brickman positively, saying that, “Marshall makes my game better. It’s like playing tennis with a pro” (qtd in Braudy, 1977). Brickman too celebrates this relationship, pointing out that in comparison to solitary work that, “I need the feedback” (qtd in Braudy, 1977). For Brickman, the collaborative working environment brings a certain responsibility; ‘when you collaborate, you are both responsible for everything. You never know when one person will make the other person think of something’ (1977).

These earlier collaborations – certainly *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan –* stand as archetypal ‘Woody Allen’ films, and are perhaps his most celebrated and certainly his most well-known.Phillip Frenchdescribes *Small Time Crooks*, one of only two of Allen’s works to star Elaine May, as being indebted to its ‘borrowing’. Yet, even more so, French suggests that Allen’s entire body of work exists outside the simple realm of a singular source of creativity, pointing out that Allen, ‘has rarely made a picture tainted by total originality’ (2003), celebrating his use of referentiality and intertextuality, and perhaps also his collaborative spirit by observing that, ‘Woody Allen has always borrowed from other filmmakers. His latest film is, happily, no exception’ (2003). Even regarding Allen’s more recent *Crisis in Six Scenes* (2016)*,* despite being a departure in form as the filmmaker’s first episodic piece, it has been noted that the text still belongs to Allen’s regular style of borrowing. As critic Megan Koester claimed, ‘while Crisis may signify a departure for its creator, Allen is nothing if not consistent reference-wise’ (2016).

 As a testament to Allen’s clear and pervasive approach to intertextual borrowing and referencing, 2015 saw the publication of an edited volume of academic analysis of precisely this element of Allen’s oeuvre, *Referentiality and the Films of Woody Allen*. Focused on ‘investigating the wealth, the diversity, and the complexity of the references in Allen’s filmic work’ (Szlezák and Wynter, 2015: 2), the editors point out that, ‘the chapters in this collection demonstrate that [his taste for quotation, parody, pastiche] has in fact become a signature of Allen’s filmmaking and testament to his intellect’ (2) and argue further that, ‘[f]ar from “an erasure of his artistic personality,” his artistry spanning across textual and medial boundaries is unrivalled in filmmaking’ (2). In all of this, however, very little is said of May in the collection. While some have observed this intertextuality when May appears, nothing has been said of her influence on Allen’s work more directly.

## Historical Context

Owing to Allen’s own successful and prolific filmmaking career, he and his name have become a yardstick by which many American comedians of the 1950s and 1960s are measured and remembered. Nichols and May’s own impact on the American comedic landscape was at least as significant as that of Allen’s and perhaps even more so, as Nachman contends; ‘Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Woody Allen left huge lasting imprints, but Nichols and May are perhaps the most ardently missed of all the satirical comedians of their era’ (2003: 319).

 Whilst Nichols moved seamlessly into direction, May’s own films were not received as well as Allen’s but are not without their own merits. Interestingly, however, even when her work does not resemble that of Allen she is still measured by his gauge. For a retrospective of May’s work at Manhattan’s Lincoln Center in 2006, *New York Times* author James Caryn claimed, ‘she does not have, and hasn't gone for, the instantly recognizable style that a director like Woody Allen has. And while she may not be a natural filmmaker, she is a natural artist’ (2006). Whilst her work has variously been critically well-received, it is, however, punctuated by films more readily described as failures. Her film directing career has been potted and yet her writing credits, particularly those for Nichols-directed films including *The Birdcage* (1996) and *Primary Colors* (1998), Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth* (1986), and her work under the pseudonym, Esther Dale, for Otto Preminger’s *Such Good Friends* (1971), Warren Beatty’s *Heaven Can Wait* (1978)and Sydney Pollack’s *Tootsie* (1982), were largely successful.

 In 1972 Elaine May released, ‘one of the few really enjoyable comedies by a young American director in recent years’ (Cohen, 1973: 60), *The Heartbreak Kid*. The film was directed from a screenplay by Neil Simon, who, incidentally, is one of the individuals who unites all three, May, Nichols and Allen. Playwright, screenwriter and author Simon provided the screen play for May’s film, in 1975 he adapted his play *The Sunshine Boys* (1972) for a feature film directed by Herbert Ross*,* which he later adapted for television in 1996 with Allen starring alongside Peter Falk in the eponymous roles, and in 1988 provided the screenplay for Nichols’ *Biloxi Blues*. In 1978, Herbert Ross, *Play it Again Sam* director (1972, written by and starring Woody Allen), made *California Suite* (1978)*,* another Neil Simon comedy with four sketches in one hotel starring Elaine May and Woody Allen alumni Michael Caine (*Hannah and Her Sisters* (1984)) and Alan Alda (*Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993)). Having all, in some way collaborated with Simon, there is a neat feeling of cross pollination amongst these filmmakers adding credence to any argument that one might make regarding the feasibility of May and Allen’s own collaboration.

## Creative overlap

May’s *The Heartbreak Kid* seesthe Jewish marriage of Lila (Jeannie Berlin, May’s daughter) to Lenny (Charles Grodin), who falls for WASP, Kelly (Cybill Shepherd) on his honeymoon. Lenny arranges to have Lila remain in their room, convincing her that her sunburn is worse than it is and contrives legal affairs and fictional court dates in order to find time to spend with Kelly and her family. Lenny leaves Lila and moves to Minnesota to marry Kelly and finds himself alone, reminiscing about Lila’s habits which originally annoyed him. Considering the similarities between this film and the work of Allen’s, one might initially consider the failing relationships and motifs of indecision and unrequited love so redolent *Annie Hall* (1977)*,* and *Manhattan* (1979). *Manhattan* concerns a Jewish man, in love with a younger woman, when he meets and falls for an excitingly tempting WASP in Diane Keaton’s Mary Wilkie and yet finally comes to realise that he was perhaps happier with his first paramour. The two films quite expertly deal in a very similar relationship notion, that being a fascinating extrapolation of, ‘you don’t know what you’ve got until its gone’.

Further comparisons exist too in the content of Jewishness in the works of both of these directors. Marat Grinberg has suggested that, ‘Woody Allen ought to be viewed as a serious Jewish artist and philosopher, whose Jewish or indeed Judaic thinking shines through even or especially in the absence of apparent Jewish markers, thematics, or identity’ (2014: 38). James Fisher too considers Allen’s on-screen representations of Jewishness as associated with the work of Elaine May:

‘Allen is one of a generation of Jewish comic writers and performers — including Neil Simon, Mel Brooks, Jackie Mason, Elaine May, Wendy Wasserstein, and others — who have had their work dismissed as extensions of borscht belt comedy when, in fact, diverse influences are present’ (2014: 187).

Fisher notably brings up May in his acknowledgement of these comedians, recognising the similarities in both the context and the content of the work of both Allen and May. Allen’s Jewishness has remained a big part of his on-screen persona and so too has it remained a key element of May’s work, not least of which in *The Heartbreak Kid*. Lila is an archetypic Jewish woman, with Mitchell S. Cohen noting that ‘Ms. Berlin, Ms. May’s daughter, is just splendid, especially as she resembles her mother. Her kvetchy Jewishness is just a touch too obvious’ (1973). In the introduction to her book, *Jewish Women on Stage, Film, and Television* (2007)*,* Roberta Mock observes the figure of the female actor in a way which this work uses to connect Jewishness with authorship. Mock’s text ties up female celebrity with the idea of the ‘“extraordinary” woman’ and suggests that the word, ‘extraordinary’:

can be considered, in itself, a type of categorisation bound up with Jewishness and that it is fundamental that “extraordinariness” somehow foregrounds the “ordinariness” it subsumes. Central to “extraordinariness” then is doubleness, or the sense that the performer is both one thing and another and that these two things do not always correspond neatly or coherently. Two manifestations of doubleness are duality and hybridity (2007, 3-4).

For Mock, ‘Duality is the presence of two separate aspects into one […] These potentials stem directly from the performers position in society and the expectations this creates for her as a Jew, as a woman, as an immigrant, as “low”, and as other’ (2007: 4). As a performer, Elaine May is an artist for whom these observations about doubleness, duality and hybridity ring true. As a writer, director, and actress, May embodies hybridity well. And yet, significantly, this hybridity ties intrinsically into notions of authorship in terms of the hybridity of ‘collective authorship’ (Dyer, 2009: 152) and in the duality required of the concept of ‘stars as authors’ (Dyer, 2009: 152), both acting and authoring. Mock further explains:

representative Jewish women who were (and are) predominantly able to control what Pamela Robertson calls their “Star Texts” (that is, a narrative of continuity comprising public performances both on and offstage/screen that creates the impression of authenticity): by producing or commissioning their own performance material (2007: 4).

Herein lies an apt description of Elaine May’s work. May is an actress who produces her own performance material and who masterfully quotes her ‘performativity in performance’ (Mock, 2007: 4), not least of which in her two acting collaborations with Allen. About Allen’s *Small Time Crooks,* Phillip French observed that the, ‘outstanding performances are from Ullman as the loveable, vulnerable, naturally wise Frenchy, and May as her dotty, kindly sister-in-law’ (2000). It is not Allen taking the praise here; the richness of this film owes an enormous debt to the masterful performance of May, and her air-headed character May Sloane, described in the movie as, “dumb like a dog or a horse or something”. Many of the film’s funniest and most cutting lines come from May; at a ritzy party, at which she is quite out of place, she tells a high-class gentleman, “I don’t like anything with toothpicks. They lodge in your throat”; or when May refers to her ex-husband: “My husband Otto was dyslexic and the only thing he could spell correctly was his name”.

 The film centres on inept crook, Ray (Allen) who concocts a plan to rob a bank by renting the neighbouring pizza store and tunnelling underneath the vault. The gang open a cookie store (because Ray’s wife Frenchy cannot cook pizza), and whilst the robbery fails, the store flourishes, resulting in a billion-dollar cookie empire rocketing the low-life, uncultured couple to high society.

May has starred in just one other of Allen’s works. In 2016 Woody Allen’s TV debut, *Crisis in Six Scenes,* was released on the Amazon Prime streaming platform. The series focuses on May and Allen as married couple Sidney and Kay Munsinger, the former an author, the latter a marriage counsellor. Their lives are disrupted when Lennie Dale (Miley Cyrus), an anti-Vietnam War revolutionary and prison escapee wanted for a bombing and the murder of a guard, abruptly turns up in the middle of the night looking for refuge. The Munsingers are currently housing a friend’s son, Alan (John Magaro), who is a soon-to-be-married member of the finance industry, following in his father’s illustrious footsteps. Lennie disrupts the status quo and radicalizes both Kay and Alan, the latter of whom blows himself up in the garden shed when attempting to make a fertiliser bomb. The series’ climax sees all of these different worlds meet under the roof of the Munsinger home in which a variety of groups come together at once: an elderly radicalized book club, members of the Constitutional Liberation Army, Kay’s therapy patients, Alan’s parents, his fiancé and her parents, resulting in Sidney driving Lennie to a local airport, hidden in the trunk of his car. The car is pulled over by a state trooper and Lennie escapes whilst Sidney distracts the officer who has mistaken him for J. D Salinger.

Allen’sseries typifies the strength of what May brings to their work together as collaborators in that she plays a much more significant role than she does in *Small Time Crooks*. In fact, here, the best jokes emanate from her character, the patently inept marriage councillor, and the elderly women of her book club. In the first episode, after Lennie first arrives, the police respond to a house alarm call and, explaining why there is a strange woman in her house Kay says, “Our daughter doesn’t count. She was a caesarean”. Soniya Saraiya observed that, ‘If there is a hero in this story, it is Elaine May’s Kay, who is the only figure in the entire series that is neither mannered nor precious’ (2016). The book club begin the show reading Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and as Lennie’s influence more heavily takes over Kay’s ideas, the book club becomes militarised with Kay suggesting a protest in front of the draft board, with another member adding that they ought to do it naked and bring along some pig’s blood. Kay at one point says of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* that she is “Fascinated by its wisdom”, describing the author as the man who, “that extremely stylish little jacket is named after”. Kay eventually becomes complicit in Lennie’s deception when she undertakes clandestine operations on Lennie’s behalf, accepting an unmarked briefcase of cash and attempting to deliver it to a stranger. A process which Sidney inevitably bumbles, with the case ending up in the hands of the police.

Despite its highlights, *Crisis in Six Scenes* was not successful, owing in part to, ‘the show’s failure to engage with the medium in which it exists’ (Lyne, 2016), and the problem that, ‘there is little to distinguish it from an overlong Allen film. The episodes do not stand alone, and serialization does not add anything of note to the story’ (Saraiya, 2016).

## On Stage

Elaine May’s more recent collaboration with Allen included the three one-act plays performed as *Relatively Speaking* (2011) whichsimilarly were received inconsistently with some polarising responses. John Del Signoreclaimed that ‘none of the plays are all that memorable’ (2011). Recalling the previously discussed dual nature of Jewishness and authorship*, New York Times* theatre critic, Charles Isherwood observed that, ‘nagging, wheedling, needling, needy or demanding moms – often of the Jewish persuasion, it must be said – have been an endlessly fertile resource for comedy writers’ (2012). And indeed this is true of this set of three plays dealing variously, as the title’s pun implies, with familial relationships. Speaking of Allen’s body of writing for the stage, It has been suggested that, ‘his theater work generally seems to hold firmly to the early roots of his comedy even as ethnic humor has increasingly become controversial for audiences, as critical reaction to Honeymoon Motel makes all too evident’ (Fisher, 2014: 183).

Allen and May’s contributions to this collection, are joined by a third from renowned filmmaker Ethan Coen, he himself little known outside of his own tremendously prolific collaborative team, the Coen brothers. Acknowledging her status as a playwright, the theatre critic Ben Brantley wrote, in reviewing May’s *Adult Entertainment* from 2002 that, ‘as a playwright, Ms. May has always been a first-class sprinter’ (2002). It is interesting indeed that Isherwood goes so far as to acknowledge the debt that this play owes to the historical performance modes from which May and Allen both come, describing the works as, ‘old-fashioned boulevard comedy – bright easy going fare that doesn’t require the deciphering of plummy or crummy British accents’ (2012), a type of comedy, Isherwood contends, the likes of which we haven’t seen since the heydays of Woody Allen and Elaine May collaborator no less, Neil Simon. Here, May’s own contribution to this triptych of familial depictions is seen as ‘a delicious study in the bliss of narcissism for those who can afford its more rarefied accoutrements, and the plague it can be to those in their orbit’ (2012). Whilst the three plays were received much less favourably by *New York* magazine, the work being described as one which, ‘nearly drowns in its own schtick’ (Brown, 2011), and identifying May’s contribution as the one piece which, ‘comes closest to inflating a full script with more than mere comic potential’ (Brown, 2011). About *Relatively Speaking*, which *New York* magazine’s Scott Brown considered to be, ‘two half-kiestered comedy sketches and one actual playlet’, Brown advised that ‘if, however, you’re looking for something more substantial than petrified shtick that smells of a writer’s sock drawer, you’d be advised to look elsewhere’ (2011).

May’s one-act contribution, *George is Dead,* sees Doreen, a rich socialite, come to the apartment of Carla the daughter of her former nanny, around midnight, to announce that her husband has just been killed in a skiing accident in Aspen. Doreen, who has not seen Carla in a good many years and with whom she has very little in common does not relate to Doreen at all and spends the time cajoling Doreen into making all of the painstaking funeral arrangements. It is deftly funny and exquisitely well-crafted. Finally admitting that the death of her eponymous husband is indeed a release for her, rather than a disaster, unsurprisingly selfishly, Doreen admits to Carla that, “But this is such an awkward age for him to die. My age, not his. If he had only died when I was old and past it or right after we were married, when I was young” (May, 2011: 33). The nauseating Doreen seems the villain of the piece until Carla’s mother, the former nanny, turns up, following Doreen’s long night of phone calls from demanding mortuaries and funeral homes, and takes care of her former charge, as a stage direction describes, ‘*As they* [Nanny and Doreen] *walk Carla starts to follow them. Without turning, the old woman waves her away with a curt gesture… and exits with her arms around Doreen’* (May, 2011: 41).

Allen’s own contribution arrives in somewhat familiar territory when in a minor plot twist, Jerry, the father of the groom, arrives at a motel, with the bride to be. This is a work which displays Allen’s work at, ‘his loosest – and sometimes lowest – but also most firecracker funny’ (Isherwood, 2012); a play which depicts the cast of a failed wedding gathered at a seedy love nest motel, ‘spewing choicely worded insults at one another at head-spinning velocity’ (Isherwood, 2012), and yet, more adversely, Scott Brown describes the play as ‘Woody Allen’s execrable “Honeymoon Motel,” a middling, PG-13 Sid Caesar sketch inflated to grotesque proportions’ (2011) and sees the narrative as simply ‘40 minutes of strenuous mugging from Police Academy’s Steve Guttenberg, as he’s progressively upstaged and eclipsed by a terrifying army of character actors’ (2011). James Fisher, on the other hand gives the play much more credence, suggesting:

‘Honeymoon Motel is a farce in the enduring sense that it questions morality and whatever is considered normal. Such issues pervade the play, while humor about Jewish life and social expectations is also rampant. Characters, largely one dimensional, represent aspects of human frailties; instead of stereotypes (in the negative sense), these figures become archetypes’ (2014: 184).

Fisher points out too, that, ‘some critics applauded Allen’s play as the best of the trio of one acts’ (2014: 183).

In other collaborative efforts, both Allen and May had also previously worked with David Mamet to produce another set of three one-act plays under the umbrella title of *Death Defying Acts* (1995)*.* Elaine Maycontributes, *Hotline,* a play in which Dorothy calls a suicide hotline, is connected with new employee Ken, who loses Dorothy as she disconnects to kill herself, whilst Ken battles wildly to get her back on the phone. Allen contributes, *Central Park West,* in which two old friends Carol and Phyllis get together as one of them, Carol has found out her husband, Sam, is leaving her for another woman, who eventually she discovers might be Phyllis. Whilst admitting that she has had an affair with Sam, Phyllis is not his only mistress and it isn’t her he is leaving his wife for but 21-year-old Juliet. Yet more familiar territory for Allen, as *Variety* observed, ‘Triumph is not a word that comes to mind with “Central Park West,”’ (Gerard, 1995). Mamet contributes, *An Interview,* which sees an attorney being interviewed and building a defence of his own character, before being damned to, “Eternity in Hell, bathed in burning white phosphorous, while listening to a symphonic Tone Poem” (Mamet, 1995: 23) purely because he is a lawyer, as his interviewer explains, “You passed the Bar, *(pause)* and you neglected to live forever” (Mamet, 1995: 23).

To return to the idea of collaboration, it seems that *Death Defying Acts,* much more evidently than the more recent, *Relatively Speaking* is a unifying, collaborative effort, in the vein of John-Steiner’s own understanding of the term as, ‘the interdependence of thinkers in the co-construction of knowledge’ (2003: 3). Indeed, the *New York Times*, reviewing the play in 1995 observed that, ‘Though each playwright has a distinctive voice, a unifying theme is provided by the kind of late-20th-century urban desperation that prompts everything from benign smiles to belly laughs’ (Canby: 17). In making keen note of the play’s solid flow and demonstrably collaborative nature Canby concludes in suggesting that: ‘"Death Defying Acts" is so cannily constructed that it successfully builds from its comparatively quiet, spookily funny beginning, "An Interview," through the alternately desperate and hilarious "Hotline," to the riotous revelations of marital betrayals in "Central Park West"’ (Canby: 17).

Problematically, for *Variety,* it is again Allen’s work which falls shortest within this triptych. *Variety*’s theatre critic described Allen’s piece as the one, ‘which offers the most accomplished writing of the evening but also the most heartless’ (Gerard, 1995). Whereas, he does admit, ‘I found “Central Park West” loathsome, others may see it as the height of sophistication’ (Gerard, 1995), taking exception mostly to the real-life echoes in Allen’s seemingly semi-autobiographical work. Many critics, on the other hand identify the autobiography in Allen’s work as one of his merits, although he would deny it himself, like many others, *New York Times critic,* Maureen Dowd argues that, ‘it was the correspondence between Mr. Allen's work and Mr. Allen's life that made him so popular’ (1995).

## Creative Overlap

These are the direct interactions which May and Allen have had, and through these case studies one can read a great deal of cross-over influence, to the point of evident, ‘creative collaboration’. There are, in fact, aspects of both Elaine May and Woody Allen’s independent work which resemble one another, providing other demonstrable examples of influence. Two works which bare resemblance are May’s play *Adult Entertainment* (2002) andAllen’s film, *Mighty Aphrodite* (1996)*.* Allen’s film reflects the tale of Pygmalion, as does Allen’s Elaine May vessel, *Small Time Crooks*. Elaine May’s play again stars her daughter in the lead role, this time as a porn star who, along with her co-stars, decides that they can write and produce their own pornographic film with the same artistic integrity as the classics, set in ancient Greece and based on the myth of Icarus and, ‘Suddenly, to considerable comic effect, Frosty Moons (Jeannie Berlin), Vixen Fox (Mary Birdsong), Jimbo J (Eric Elice), and Heidi-the-Ho are having cracked discussions about everything from *Death of a Salesman* to Susan Sontag’ (Siegel and Siegel, 2002). This resembles the social climbing, comedy of errors, *Small Time Crooks,* redolent ofNew Jersey native-come millionaire Frenchy as she tries, disastrously, to throw a swanky party before seeking high society lessons from Hugh Grant’s art dealer, David. The Pygmalion references here are not implicit as, after a relationship which turns passionate, David buys Frenchy a copy of Shaw’s book inscribed, “To my favourite Eliza, from your Professor Higgins. Love, David”.

*Mighty Aphrodite* sees married couple Lenny and Amanda Weinrib, played by Allen and Helena Bonham Carter, adopt a child and subsequently, Lenny becomes obsessed with finding the child’s biological mother, who, it turns out, is porn star Linda Ash, in an academy award-winning performance by Mira Sorvino. The plot here too, becomes very Pygmalion-esque, when Lenny endeavours to help Linda overcome her career by buying off her pimp and setting her up with a new job so that when his son grows up and looks for his biological mother he doesn’t find her a porn star. The whole thing is punctuated by a Greek-Chorus, proclaiming the film’s narrative, “a tale as Greek as fate itself”. Bailey observed that, ‘the implicit identification of the chorus with Allen’s screen persona suggests that there is a more substantial justification for their presence than the anachronism-inspired laughs they provoke’ (2016: 217), tying the relevance of this film to Allen’s own personal life issues with his ex-partner, Mia Farrow’s adopted daughters, his subsequent marriage to Soon-Yi Previn and the alleged molestation. These texts in their echoing reflections of Greek origins, and synchronised exploration of the porn industry through the Pygmalion framework demonstrate just how May and Allen have a tendency to function along almost synchronised lines.

Whilst measurable influence is one thing, the readable impact which May has had on Allen’s work is much more significant. It is readily evident that *Crisis in Six Scenes’* Kay Munsinger is the architect of the couple’s life, as Sydney complains, “Geez, you sit here with these brilliant notions and I carry them out”, and yet one is left to attempt to discern just how much of Woody Allen’s dialogue is the design of his occasional collaborator Elaine May, a performer to whom improvisation was so important that, ‘she would go on forever if you let her’ (Rollins qtd in Nachman, 2003: 342). To some extent, the question which this chapter has striven to answer is whether Elaine May is the redeeming success of Allen’s work. The contention to be made here is, having identified May’s own success in both filmmaking and on the stage, one might suggest that May’s work, although she is less prolific than Allen, she ought to be equally well-appreciated and well-received. In Allen’s work, it is easily observed that Elaine May is not just an occasional collaborator but a persistent and influential presence. Considering her own enormously creative work, whilst this chapter has noted that Allen’s auto-biography is what, ‘made him so popular’ (Canby, 1995: 17), perhaps for *Death Defying Acts, Small Time Crooks, Relatively Speaking* and *Crisis in Six Scenes,* at the very least, it might equally be argued that it is the inimitable Elaine May which makes these texts so popular.

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