

cinema



* Ellen Page and Jesse Eisenberg in *To Rome With Love*.

Woody Allen's Roman holiday

The maverick American director has just finished his tour de Europe with a twisted comedic ode to Rome. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

There are times when I ask friends at the film festivals I cover around the world why they never step into India. The friend from Brazil would travel across to Europe or the one from Israel to northern Africa. But India? Well, it still seems too mysterious, too far away for them.

Similarly, several movie directors and actors have never considered visiting India, let alone watching the country's cinema, huge by all accounts and robust by some.

Maverick helmer Woody Allen is no exception. Despite references to India in his films, Woody says he has never seen a movie from that country, which turns out dozens and dozens of celluloid creations in a year

— much like a production line in a giant factory.

And mind you, he also gave a stellar part to India's Frieda Pinto in *You Will Meet A Tall Dark Stranger*.

Quizzed recently if he would set a film in India, Allen said he would certainly fly into the country with his cast and crew, camera and computers if "something witty happens there".

Now this may be a million dollar puzzle. What is it about India or in India that will make him roar with laughter? And why is it that he wants humour to seduce him to come over? It was not quite that when he decided to make his tour de Europe, setting not one but four movies in the continent.

Woody's latest European journey, *To Rome With Love*, meanders along the streets and alleys of that eternal

city, peeping into its distracting ruins, each of which has a story to say, a bit of civilisation to reveal.

In a recent chat with the media about this work, he said: "It is a comedy that follows the lives of various individuals, some of whom are American and some Italian, some residents and some visitors, all around the enchanted ancient city. These people from different walks of life will experience romances and adventures, in a place where they're surrounded by extraordinary culture, art and cuisine."

To Rome With Love follows his other European trysts in London, Barcelona and Paris and is made up of four stories that despite intercultural never meet in a Fellini-like grand climax.

Allen himself appears in one as

Jerry (the first time after the 2006 *Scoop*), an opera director who is as nervous about aeroplane turbulence as he is seeing the end of his career. In Rome with wife Phyllis (Judy Davis) to meet his daughter Hayley's (Alison Pill) future husband, Michelangelo (Flavio Parenti), a vocal critic of the market economy, Jerry "discovers" a talented singer in the boy's father.

The hitch is that the man can only sing when he is showering, and so Jerry takes him around wrapped in a towel and a bathroom on wheels. Some of the film's best humour can be heard here in this chapter, with Allen as the deadpan-faced guy pushing laugh and luck to the very end if only to get his sunken vocation up and running.

In another strand, we have a successful architect, the still dashing

Alec Baldwin as John, who during his Roman sojourn runs into an architect student, Jack (Jesse Eisenberg). Jack's live-in girlfriend, Sally (Greta Gerwig) in her naivety introduces him to her best friend, Monica (Ellen Page).

Well, with Sally busy at school, Rome begins to cast a magic spell on Jack and Monica, and John's warning to Jack begins to ring true as the couple's affair rocks through a moral dilemma.

Ethics and predicament lace another story. Antonio (Alessandro Tiberi) and wife Milly (Alessandra Mastronardi) are newlyweds looking forward to an afternoon of business meetings with the boy's rich and important relatives that will give him a big break. Instead, the couple get separated. While Milly spends the day with a famous Italian actor, Antonio gets entangled with an extremely attractive prostitute, Anna (what a wonderful performance by that alluring Penelope Cruz).

Allen gives yet another dose of life when his camera zooms into the home and office of a boringly disciplined and ordinary Italian clerk, Leopoldo, played with trademark gusto by Oscar-winner Roberto Benigni.

Overnight, he finds himself a celebrity, hounded by photographers (who want to even see him shaving) and hunted by autograph seekers (who would love to know the kind of underpants he wears). In a way, this part could seem stretched, even trifle silly.

Also, Allen's canvas is too crowded for comfort, with the result that some of the players are hardly fleshed out. There is often a pervading sense of implausibility that *Matchpoint* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* steered clear of. While *Matchpoint*, set in London, did have an ethical issue (with the guy escaping punishment after murdering his lover), it was the best of the helmer's four European works. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* unfolding in the Spanish city was the lightest, the most breezy and the perhaps the most romantic without any hangups.

Midnight in Paris is a romantic fantasy characterising a screenwriter and his trips into nostalgia that he makes to resolve his differences with his fiancée.

However, despite some of the implausibility in *To Rome With Love*, it does capture the city's eternal romanticism as we walk with his characters to some of the legendary landmarks like the Spanish Steps, Trevi Fountain and Colosseum — also made cinematically immortal by directors like Fellini.

This Roman holiday appears relaxed and comes with a chuckle, nay lots of laughs, and is supposedly his last venture in the continent before he returns to his own New York for the next work.

Some Woody critics are heaving a sigh of relief, for they feel he is best on his home ground. I beg to differ.

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