

'Radio Days' doesn't crystalize



Betty Midler (below) and Shelley Long (above) become friends, despite the fact that both are rivals for the same man, who two-timed them, in the hilarious comedy "Outrageous Fortune."



"Radio Days" (PG) is Woody Allen's latest, a pleasant trip down memory lane that leaves travelers slightly unsatisfied. While the scenery is pleasant, the road is bumpy and the way stations seem unrelated.

Set in Rockaway, N.Y., prior to and during World War II, "Radio Days" traces the impact of radio on an extended, middle-class Jewish family in this small community just east of Coney Island.

The family includes quite a crowd, all well-acted, with Mother (Julie Kavner) and Father (Michael Tucker) trying to keep things running for unmarried Aunt Bea (Dianne Wiest), Uncle Abe (Josh Mostel), Aunt Ceil (Renee Lippin) and Cousin Ruthie (Joy Newman), plus Grandma (Leah Carrey) and Grandpa (William Hageman).

Allen fans will recognize many of these faces as Woody's regulars. Diane Keaton is a pleasant, soft-singing nightclub chanteuse while Mia Farrow is an offbeat nightclub cigarette girl who becomes a radio gossip columnist.

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD newcomer (to Allen movies) Seth Green is Joe, the young son whose memories populate this film. His voice-over narration is read by Allen. All told, the supporting cast and extras provide the film with a Fellini-like array of faces.

The film's very valid concept, which reflects a lot of Allen's personal memories and autobiographical experiences, is that radio had a major impact on American culture.

There's no quarrel with that premise, and "Radio Days" has a number of evocative sequences in which the decor, the cinematography and the action are guaranteed to stimulate intense longing for the good old days.

But the film's structure is far too episodic for smooth flow and sustained interest. It lacks coherence and unity and tends to be too personal. If Allen were your uncle just back from a trip, it would be swell to

spend time with his stories and slides, but there are limits to such an evening's appeal.

The episodes shift from family events (real and imagined) to their favorite radio programs and then to the lives of the broadcast performers. While that is a marvelous idea, for life is truly a jumble of reality and illusion, pretense and practicality, the bare, 90 minutes of "Radio Days" fails to deal fully with its basic concept and falters when it should flow smoothly from mundane life to high illusion.

"OUTRAGEOUS Fortune" (R), on the other hand, has no such identity problems and is, flat out from start to finish, a very wacky comedy lightened with just the right amounts of excitement.

Satire and burlesque at their very best are fast-paced, with a continual progression of characters and situations. "Outrageous Fortune" takes off with just a barely noticeable delay to set up would-be actress Lauren (Shelley Long) as a prissy, theatrical artist.

A lot of the film's comedy turns on Lauren's character as it contrasts with that of another young actress, Sandy (Betty Midler), who is just as loose as Lauren is tight. Sandy is a very comic, "typical" New Yorker who lives by her wits and promises of her body.

Lauren and Sandy meet in acting classes run by the great Russian master, Stanislov Korzenowski (Robert Frost). They also meet in the morgue while attempting to identify their lovers' bodies. It turns out that their lovers are one and the same, Michael (Peter Coyote), whose twinning leads Lauren and Sandy on a madcap chase in the very best comic tradition.

THE FILM HAS everything except rockets, as Lauren and Sandy run across CIA, KGB, drug dealers and modern Indians, including George Carlin as a '60s burn-out running a trading post on the reservation.



the movies

Dan Greenberg

Betty Midler's Sandy is vintage Midler at its best, a raucous New York "broad" chasing a two-timer across the Arizona desert in high heels. The contrast of her character with Shelley Long's polite, Eastern finishing-school demeanor is very funny. Long's unexpected behavioral changes, as the transcontinental chase escalates, provide further comic contrast.

For this, her first completed film, screenwriter Leslie Dixon has produced a polished scenario with clever dialogue and good elaboration on a basic storyline.

However, ridiculous "Outrageous Fortune" gets it's never a problem. The quick sequence of events continually amuses and never allows the audience time to complain about how improbable these events really are.

Perhaps the best thing about the film is its good spirit and open acknowledgement of the joke. No pretenses here, just a lot of rapid-fire comedy that will delight every audience.



Seth Green is the young son in Woody Allen's charming but disjointed "Radio Days."

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