Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Irrational Man – Cast Parker Posey

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2015

Parker Posey has been blessed to work with so many visionary indie directors of her time. Richard Linklater helped to launch Posey's career with *Dazed and Confused* in 1993. As a staple in the films of Hal Hartley (*Flirt*, *Amateur*, and his trilogy, *Henry Fool*, *Fay Grim*, and *Ned Rifle*) and Christopher Guest (*Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*, *A Mighty Wind*, *For Your Consideration*), she has created so many memorable characters. Posey has twice been awarded the prestigious Independent Spirit Award for her acting — in *Broken English* and *Personal Velocity*, and in 1997, she received "Special Jury Recognition" at the Sundance Film Festival for *The House Of Yes* – a tribute to her performance, as well as, her unique contribution to the world of independent film.

Posey met Woody Allen for the first time more than twenty years ago. It was while she was serving as a juror at the Krakow Film Festival, alongside Allen's casting director, Juliet Taylor, that she made the connection that led to her scoring an audition for Allen's latest film, ***Irrational Man***. Woody Allen purportedly cast the actress because he liked her alliterative name — she was named by her dad for pin-up girl Suzy Parker, Chris Posey's favorite 1950's model — and Allen had always fantasized about calling out on set for "Parker Posey."

As she reveals in her very intimate and **insightful interview with Marc Maron**, Posey had been deeply impacted in 2014 by the deaths of Robin Williams and Phillip Seymour Hoffman, whom she had considered a close personal friend. She was "feeling out of style or out of place in the culture," suffering a crisis of faith, around the time that she got the call from casting director Juliet Taylor.

Posey brings just the right degree of intelligent and sexy sassiness to Rita, a college professor deeply dissatisfied with the life she is living in *Irrational Man*. In Emma Stone, Allen has identified a perfect Diane Keaton surrogate to play Rita's student competition for the affections of Abe. Likewise, Parker Posey deftly picks up the narrative thread that Diane Wiest once commandeered. The role, the style, and the material are perfectly suited to Posey's Jack Nicholson-esque cool and dangerous, irrational flair in concert with Joaquin Phoenix, who plays the Woody Allen professor of her fantasies.

As we gather round the coffee table of her suite at the San Francisco Fairmont hotel, Parker Posey is awash in color – with her orange jumper, fuchsia shirt, and bleach-blond hair, she resembles an exotic bird of paradise, as she joins us cross-legged on the floor. Newly returned from Cannes film festival, she relates that she is being courted by a director intent adapting *Rear Window* for stage at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music], heading into production with Ira Sachs and Greg Kinnear on

The Silent Treatment, and is very happy to join the five of us, to share details of her Woody Allen feature debut, *Irrational Man*. “It’s a creative time,” she admits. “What a gift to be in a Woody Allen movie and to talk to everyone.”

Joaquin Phoenix as Abe and Parker Posey as Rita, “Irrational Man.”
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia Stein: Your character Rita Richards has this irrational fantasy about Abe Lucas. Can you describe that fantasy?

Parker Posey: We have two women in the movie – an older woman and a younger woman who both flirt with the irrational man. Emma Stone is the younger woman, Jill, a student of philosophy, and she has a crazy crush on Abe, the philosophy teacher who comes to town.

And I’ve been thinking about him too. I have this fantasy that when he comes, he’s going to rescue me. He’s going to take me out of this boring, trapped life — of being a teacher. This is a portrayal of a woman who is teetering. Rita is aware of her fantasy. I don’t think Rita is irrational. I think she’s suffering. He’s suffering too, but he’s irrational.

We see these two women come really close to seeing this man, and to not seeing him. It’s like the Minotaur in the maze, and the women who, with their flashlights, are being drawn in, on an unconscious level and on a conscious level.

Joaquin Phoenix as Abe, “Irrational Man.”
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Parker Posey as Rita and Emma Stone as Jill, “Irrational Man.”
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: How did you prepare to play the part of a University professor of science?

Parker: There are not a lot of women who are science teachers, so I toughened her up. I had those great loafers that I got at the good will — that I felt were very science teacher, if you know what I mean. She’s just schlepping her bags around and thinking about other things. Science is really exciting right now, there’s a lot going on, but it doesn’t stop Rita from fantasizing. Even the science teacher can be taken by the irrational man and have those desires to run away and be rescued.

I really just L-O-V-E a good teacher, and I always have. My teachers were always characters to me, in a way. The way they held themselves. They were savvy and brassy, and they were kind of stars in the classroom. I have always wanted to play a teacher.

I feel like Rita is one of those great teachers. The students love her. The faculty likes her. She gets along with everybody. And she knows everything about the school — she’s a little over it. She’s cool enough to talk to the kids, she smokes pot, and she has a great record collection. She’s got crazy theories about Abe. She’s a talker. I loved being in a Woody Allen movie and playing one of these women. It was great!

Sophia: This is your first Woody Allen film, and it fits you like a glove. You feel perfect in the

role, the material, the style. When I was growing up, one of my biggest irrational fantasies was playing opposite Woody Allen in a Woody Allen film. I had a big crush on Allen. So I was wondering if you harbored some Woody Allen fantasies of your own?

Parker: Of course. Of course. When Louis C.K. was working on *Blue Jasmine*, Woody directed him, "Go over here and dance with Sally Hawkins." Louis was like, "How do I do that?" Woody demonstrated: "You just walk over to her, take her like this, spin her around and dance. You know …" And Louie responded: "I'm not you. I can't do that. I'm not as charming or as graceful as you are." Woody Allen really has it all. After I got cast, I saw a movie that Allen did in the "70s (that he didn't write), called *The Front*, with Zero Mostel. He's so funny and charming and intelligent. Just his wit, and the way that he writes women … What a gift to be in a Woody Allen movie.

Director Woody Allen and Emma Stone, "Irrational Man."
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: Certain folks have, at times, taken umbrage at the plausibility of women throwing themselves at Woody Allen or his surrogate fictional stand-in. They have fairly consistently objected to the idea of a younger woman falling in love with such an older man, to that disparity in age. Is it truthful in your experience or understanding that younger women will fall hard for such older men?

Parker: It's as old as the Greeks. I read a script not too long ago, about a teacher who is attracted to a younger student; I don't see anything really subversive about it. Teacher-student is a classic motif. You know, we are all teachers and students to ourselves. There's a way to look at storytelling that's not so literal. Do I wish there were more films with women my age and men my age acting like adults? Yes. But *Irrational Man* is a grown-up movie.

Sophia: You were nicknamed "Queen of the Indies" by *Time Magazine*. In an era of filmmaking that has come to be so dominated by blockbusters and franchises, how did you manage to carve out a career based almost entirely on independent films? Was that a deliberate choice on your part?

Parker: No, no, no. It's something that the movie, *Irrational Man*, touches upon — just the randomness of it all. If you look at my resume, I did most of the independent movies in the "90s, and then the independent film system changed.

I think they support the auteur filmmaker in France; whereas in this country, we don't. We so want the new, undiscovered, twenty-something, that we haven't nurtured the storytellers, the writer-director auteurs. We never really saw enough of the second or third films from a lot of those incredible directors of the "90s, which is heartbreaking.

The past decade, I would say, I've been doing what my agents told me to do — which is guest star on this TV show, take meetings in L.A., show up for this and it could lead to something. I've done a few independent films, like *Broken English*, but not as much work in independent cinema in the past decade as I would have liked.

How did I manage it? Luck. It's total luck. In that, I feel really blessed.

Director Woody Allen and Joaquin Phoenix, "Irrational Man."
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Working on *Irrational Man*, I found myself looking over at Woody Allen (it was so bittersweet) and thinking: Wow, the progenitor of [all of] this, you could say — and the last man standing! When you think about Allen's personality and his gifts: you have music, you have writing, you have acting, filmmaking, his influences – philosophy and Bergman, his sense of humor … you could say that he's influenced everybody in American cinema. Especially now – people like Louis C.K. Creating your own material and humor out of your neuroses …

Irrational Man is kind of a Hitchcockian movie. The wit to it is very modern, I think. To me, it is also kind of screwball and enjoyable. We watch two great actors – the mercurial Joaquin Phoenix, an artist who swims in his own depths, and the terrific Emma Stone — with such great chemistry, kind of dupe each other. That's really fun to watch! That is so old school and so entertaining.

Emma Stone as Jill and Joaquin Phoenix as Abe, "Irrational Man."
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Sophia: Equality for women in film is a hot topic in the news at the moment. Many high profile actors and filmmakers are speaking up about the lack of opportunities and equality for women in Hollywood —

Parker: We also are having [conversations about] transgender issues and the evolution of the sexes, right now. I think the bigger picture is the melding of the masculine and feminine, the integration of those parts in all of us. I think it is wonderful, and it's about time.

There are so, so many women that have stories to tell. What concerns me really is the opposition of men against women, of men scared of women. Men feeling emasculated, and women feeling victimized, and all this over the fence kind of stuff, which has been happening for a while.

I want the stories to change. I think that we're living in really masculine times – with explosions even in light comedies. I want storytelling to come back in a way that's more inclusive of diversity — and entertaining. Storytelling that's lighthearted.

Sophia: Of the many characters you have played, is there any one character that you would say most accurately reflects your personality?

Parker: Every time I work, I feel that part is me. But then, after it's over, it's like I gut it and let go of that part of myself. So it's a real paradox because that part lived inside of me. I gave life to it. Then, that part is dead, you let it go.

Joaquin Phoenix as Abe and Parker Posey as Rita, "Irrational Man."
Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Top Image: Joaquin Phoenix as Abe and Parker Posey as Rita, "Irrational Man." Photo by Sabrina Lantos © 2015 Gravier Productions, Inc., courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Irrational Man — Official Website

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