

To Rome with Love

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

Lit by the prodigious cinematographer Darius Khondji, Rome looks glorious in Woody Allen's latest, an omnibus of four loosely connected comedies in different styles. The movie is a pleasant diversion, if rather clumsy in its construction.

The centerpiece story—and the one that feels most like Allen—involves Jesse Eisenberg as an American architecture student in Rome whose domestic arrangements with his girlfriend (Greta Gerwig) are disturbed when her best friend (Ellen Page), a neurotic actress on the rebound from a failed romance, comes to visit. Alec Baldwin plays a famous architect whom Eisenberg invites home for coffee when they meet by chance in the street. His character becomes a nonrealist device, administering advice to the increasingly befuddled young man, and though Allen doesn't use him with consistency, Baldwin's line readings are very funny. And the combination of Eisenberg (yet another young stand-in for Allen) and Page is ticklish and satisfying.

Allen himself shows up in the absurdist comedy section, which works only intermittently. He plays a retired experimental opera director, in Rome with his wife (Judy Davis) to meet his daughter's fiancé. While there he finds that the fiancé's father (real-life opera singer Fabio Armiliato), an undertaker, has a magnificent voice, so he volunteers to manage the man's career. The problem is that the undertaker's musical talents shine only when he sings in the shower.

The Italian comedian Roberto Benigni appears in an amusing light satire about the nature of fame. He's a Roman everyman who is discovered, thrust in front of a TV camera and turned into a star whose every banality is treated as a fascinating jewel.

The fourth story, a farce, remakes Federico Fellini's marvelous 1952 comedy *The White Sheik*, in which a provincial girl, in Rome on her honeymoon, is swept away on a romantic idyll with her favorite celebrity—while her husband has to make up excuses for her absence to his stuffed-shirt relatives. In Allen's version, the bride (Alessandra Mastronardi) gets lost in the streets of Rome and winds up on a movie set, romanced by a pompous, self-adoring star (Antonio Albanese). Meanwhile, her

hapless hubby (Alessandro Tiberi) has to pretend that the prostitute (Penélope Cruz) who comes to his hotel room by accident is actually his wife. Tiberi and Mastronardi are charmingly unaffected young performers, and their fresh faces provide a nice counterpart to Allen's usual panoply of familiar character actors.

The only commonality among the four stories is the setting, but that seems to be sufficient. The film has a sun-drenched glow, and it's airier—freer feeling—than most of Allen's movies. Its point of view is that Rome is so gorgeous and warm that it can make your brain melt through your ears, so the people who drift through its labyrinthine neighborhoods can't be blamed for their lunatic behavior. In the main story, it's not just the Roman sun that affects the architecture student's senses but also that age-old idiot-maker, sex. When his girlfriend's friend begins to chatter about her lesbian affair with an underwear model, Eisenberg's slightly open mouth looks paralyzed and his eyes acquire a hypnotic shimmer. It's Baldwin's character's job to try to alert this susceptible swain to the dangers at hand. It's a losing proposition.