

# Movie: Zelig's story the reel thing

By Kathy Amen

*Zelig*. Directed and written by Woody Allen; produced by Robert Greenhut for Orion/Warner. Starring Woody Allen and Mia Farrow. Rated PG. Showing at the North Star Cinema.

Amazing! Stupendous! Incredible! These adjectives were used in the popular press of the 1920s to describe Leonard Zelig. The same description fits Woody Allen's new movie, which recounts the adventures of the unlikely hero. *Zelig* is the most original American comedy I have ever seen.

*Zelig's* (Allen) story is told as a TV documentary. The spoof is so complete and accurate that no one who sees it will be able to watch the reel thing again without giggling.

Allen has managed to integrate his recognizable face smoothly into a number of old still photographs and newsreels. In addition, the scenes shot for this movie are "aged" perfectly. There is hardly a seam between the real and the fabricated.

Some of *Zelig's* jokes and sight gags would be only mildly amusing done straight. But, they are hilarious on grainy, black and white film supposedly dug out of some

vault. The contrast between what we've been conditioned to expect in this kind of film -- serious news pictures -- and Allen's mugging makes for inspired comedy.

To confuse the issue even further, some of the "contemporary" interviews are with real intellectuals playing themselves. And some

are with actors playing older versions of characters in the "newsreels."

*Zelig* is a movie with a full-length gimmick; people who don't care for gimmicks won't like it. But the story is interesting -- if completely ridiculous -- on its own.

The old photos and films are fascinating. They would be fun to watch unaltered, but here an additional element is present: was that really Hitler? Carol Lombard? Babe Ruth?

Woody Allen's movies have always had a good measure of both slapstick and highbrow comedy. *Zelig* is no exception.

The movie can probably be enjoyed by someone who doesn't know who F. Scott Fitzgerald and Saul Bellow are. But, people who do will enjoy it more, provided they don't mind some intellectual name-dropping.

*Zelig* has the ability to change his physical characteristics to resemble those of the people around him. He developed this talent -- or affliction -- because he wanted to belong, to be liked.

As one of the interviewed intellectuals (a real one) points out, we all feel this need, of course, so *Zelig's* story may not be so outlandish after all.

Allen usually has more on his mind than just laughs. His affection for *Zelig* and his public are catching. But the best thing about *Zelig* is the wonderfully inventive way his story is told.

