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Big Apple rhapsody

RIGHT NOW the only lines longer than the ones at the gas station are the people waiting to see Woody Allen's acclaimed new film *Manhattan*. Shot in stunning black-and-white by cinematographer Gordon Willis, the film at first glance looks like a splendid return to comic form. Yet while it is very funny indeed, *Manhattan* also reveals an unexpected seriousness.

Woody Allen has, if you like, converted to dramatic filmmaking (let's consider *Interiors* a fling), and he's surpassed himself. Beyond that it's also clear he has become a bona-fide director, who has made the transition from sitcom to first-class, well-constructed film narrative. All of which has been certified heavy-duty enough to get him on the cover of a recent issue of *Time*, looking like he wishes he were somewhere else.

Manhattan is a great romantic comedy with inner depths of sensitivity and wisdom. Co-scripted by Allen and Marshall Brickman, the story is a downbeat reprise of *Annie Hall*. It once again takes up the theme of love and its entanglements, this time reflected in two parallel relationships, both of which are social bad news.

Allen creates his alter-ego in the role of Isaac Davis, a successful television comedy writer in his

early forties who has gotten involved with a 17 year-old high school student named Tracy (Mariel Hemingway). Davis' close friend Yale (Michael Murphy), happily married, now realizes he's in love with another woman, Mary Wilke (Diane Keaton). Each couple seemingly is stymied by a "no-win situation," as Mary says. The reasons why reflect Allen's own perplexity about the nature of relationships.

Mary and Yale resemble the sophisticated neurotics of a Jules Feiffer cartoon. Like the upper middle-class Wasp family of *Interiors*, highly educated, privileged, articulate people, they have no idea how to cope with their real feelings. In place of understanding, they rationalize. Keaton gives a terrific performance as Allen's view of a trendy pseudo-intellectual, full of analytical jargon (she describes her pet dachshund as a "penis substitute") whose lifeline to reality is her shrink. Isaac names her the winner of the Zelda Fitzgerald Emotional Maturity Award for her contradictory sense of self.

Isaac's relationship with Tracy has a more deceptively easy problem: the difference of over 25 years in their ages. In contrast to previous Woody Allen characters, Isaac is no schlemiel. Twice divorced (his second wife left him

for her lesbian lover), he still finds himself easily acceptable to women. Isaac's conviction that Tracy cannot know (because of her youth) whether she really loves him is his own defense.

But their relationship also expresses Allen's abiding concern with mortality. Death, in one guise or another, has often figured in his films; here it matters as an ethical issue — and excuse. Isaac insists he is too old, and therefore it is not right for someone that young to make a commitment to him. No wonder *The Grand Illusion* is his favorite film.

Both involvements suffer a breakdown, and Allen blames the wrongs of contemporary civilization. The most disturbing question in *Manhattan* is the difficulty of maintaining a long-term relationship (Isaac confides to Mary that he wonders why none of his relationships have lasted longer than the one between Hitler and Eva Braun).

Isaac, in fact, is writing a book called *Decaying Values* (expanding on a short story about his mother, "The Castrating Zionist"), and in many ways, the film expresses the sense that the moral ambivalence of modern society has taken its toll on personal integrity. Drugs, infidelity, the confessional book Isaac's ex-wife has published about their mar-



Allen and Keaton run for cover and into love's entanglements.

riage, movie novelizations, make easy exits. They serve as pretexts people use to avoid responsibility for the hurt they inflict on others.

Woody Allen is too much the consummate artist of the human comedy to leave his characters in the lurch of soap opera. Their predicaments may be painful, but they are surrounded by romantic possibilities. *Manhattan* opens with a visual celebration of New York City, accompanied by a George Gershwin score. Gershwin and New York figure throughout the film, creating the atmosphere and the inspiration for romance. It is not the Manhattan of tenements and street crime, but a place where people are prone to fall in love involuntarily.

Best of all, *Manhattan* tells

them to take the chance. Repeatedly, the film offers a series of gentle admonitions about risking the courage to change. Isaac is appalled at himself for quitting his job, but Yale tells him the worst thing that could happen is that he'll learn something about himself. When Mary claims everyone she knows is brilliant, Isaac tells her that maybe she should get to know some stupid people, as she might learn something.

For both couples the most important learning comes from stumbling through complexes and heartaches to an acceptance of taking a risk on their feelings for one another. Woody Allen doesn't make any promises in *Manhattan*, but he has made a wonderful, comic, and very moving film.