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Heavy: Another Woman's Rowlands and Farrow

Two Serious Ladies

BY AMY TAUBIN

ANOTHER WOMAN. Directed and written by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Released by Orion Pictures. At the Paris, opening October 14.

MADAME SOUSATZKA. Directed by John Schlesinger. Screenplay by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and Schlesinger. Produced by Robin Dalton. Presented by Cineplex Odeon Films. A Universal Release. At the Baronet, opening October 14.

Another Woman and Madame Sousatzka are cautionary tales about the dire fate awaiting the woman who tarries too long with the alarm on her biological clock in the snooze position. She will awake in menopausal panic, realizing, alas, too late, that professional accomplishment (even in that most womanly line of work—teaching) is no substitute for the direct fulfillment of maternal instinct.

Another Woman is a serious Woody Allen film, its pristine surface unruffled by any form of humor, even the unintended parody of *Interiors*. Some will argue that Allen's talents are better suited to comedy, but I would like to suggest that his true calling is that of personal shopping adviser, and that he should hasten to take up this line of work before age dims his exquisitely discerning eye and ear. How tasteful the clothes are in this film—no parvenu Ralph Laurens, but shapeless, heathery woollens that defy mere fashion and smell like Crayolas. And the music—only the quintessential recordings of Satie, Mahler, Bach. And how about Erroll Garner performing Jerome Kern?

Indeed, in its technical aspects—the casting and direction of the actors, the luminous Sven Nykvist cinematography (which manages to be both as soft as an impressionist painting and as three-dimensional as a stereopticon slide)—*Another Woman* is highly accomplished. The shape of the narrative is no less impressive. Fluidly blending dialogue and voice-over, action and memory, realism and allegory, it manages to suggest psychodrama while eschewing the expressionist conventions of that genre.

The essential element in psychodrama is character delineation. Unfortunately, Allen's script for *Another Woman* is so insubstantial in that area that it leaves even the resourceful Gena Rowlands at a loss. Rowlands plays Marion, the chairwoman of a university philosophy department with several books to her credit. She has been married twice, first to one of her own professors and currently to a surgeon. Marion's emotional makeup, distant and withholding, is diametrically and, I suspect, pointedly opposed to that of the let-it-all-hang-out character Rowlands played 10 years ago in the brilliantly ramshackle *Opening Night*, the John Cassavetes film revived at this year's New York Film Festival. In that movie, Rowlands is an actress who has been cast as "the second woman"—the persona that supposedly emerges when a woman reaches "a certain age." Rowlands salvages her own identity crisis, the producer's investment, and everyone's reputation by drastically (and drunkenly) ~~rewriting the play before a live audience~~

on opening night. Would that Allen had allowed her the same privilege.

In Allen's film, Rowlands encounters "another woman" when she rents what she assumes is a quiet office and discovers that she can hear every word of the psychoanalytic sessions taking place next door. She's transfixed by the voice of one of the patients (Mia Farrow). This other woman's anxiety is contagious, transmitted to Marion, like Legionnaires' disease, through the ventilation shaft. The virus taps into Marion's unconscious and brings to light long-repressed fears and desires. When Marion passes the woman in the hallway, she's amazed to discover that she is very pregnant.

She becomes obsessed with this other woman who, like the Klimt painting of the pregnant nude, is named Hope. Hope haunts Marion's sleep and her waking, forcing her to reassess both past and future. The two women finally meet in the flesh, and Marion confesses to Hope her regret at never having had a child. (She had an abortion early on, because pregnancy would have ended her career.) Later, she overhears Hope describing their meeting to her shrink. Hope's assertion—that Marion avoided motherhood because she was afraid of emotional commitment—is a revelation to Marion, more important than the simultaneous discovery of her husband's sexual infidelity. She resolves to change her life. How? I hate to say it, but by becoming more in touch with her feelings.

It's pretty easy to dismiss the choice of a way of life, when there is no evidence that such a life was ever lived. We never see Marion with either colleagues or students, never see her pick up a book or set pen to paper. "What branch of philosophy is she in, and what's she reading?" inquired two of my academic friends. Obviously, these basic issues never crossed Allen's mind, or if they did, he studiously avoided them. Marion seems to be on permanent sabbatical. The only time she encounters a student is when she's accosted in a restaurant by a woman (she seems like one of the grotesque fans from *Stardust Memories*) who wants to thank Marion for changing her life 20 years earlier through a paper Marion gave entitled "Ethics and Responsibility."

With the struggles, accomplishments, and frustrations of the academic life notable by their absence, Marion is no more than a psychological cliché. Allen isn't interested in philosophy as a particular kind of labor, but as a code word for seriousness. But merely claiming that Marion is a philosopher rather than, say, a TV news producer, does not automatically make the film philosophical—or even Bergmanesque.

Around the time *Another Woman* was produced, Allen, who was already in his early fifties, became a father for the first time. Not a totally irrelevant fact when you consider the degree to which his oeuvre is imbued with autobiography. Am I being paranoid to read the filmmaker's attitude as more gloating than compassionate? The movie and its title imply that women are the other, or second, sex, because time is not on their side.