

Document Citation

Title	Film reviews : September
Author(s)	Todd McCarthy
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1987 Dec 11
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	10
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	September, Allen, Woody, 1987

September

(COLOR)

Variety 12-16-87
An Orion Pictures release of a Jack Rollins-Charles H. Joffe production. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Executive producers, Rollins, Joffe. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Camera (Du Art color, Deluxe prints), Carlo Di Palma; editor, Susan E. Morse; production design, Santo Loquasto; art direction, Speed Hopkins; set decoration, George DeTitta Jr.; costume design, Jeffrey Kurland; sound, James Sabat; associate producer, Gail Sicilia; casting, Juliet Taylor. Reviewed at the Orion screening room, L.A., Nov. 30, 1987. (MPAA Rating: PG.) Running time: 82 MINS.

Howard Denholm Elliott
Stephanie Dianne Wiest
Lane Mia Farrow
Diane Elaine Stritch
Peter Sam Waterston
Lloyd Jack Warden
Mr. Raines Ira Wheeler
Mrs. Raines Jane Cecil
Mrs. Mason Rosemary Murphy

Hollywood — "September" sees Woody Allen in a compellingly melancholy mood, as he sends four achingly unhappy younger people and two better adjusted older ones through a grim story drenched with Chekhovian overtones. Although exceedingly well acted and sparked by numerous outstanding scenes, drama seems a bit curtailed, as if Allen were afraid to really let loose with his characters, and result doesn't feel like a full meal. Like his previous somber drama, "Interiors," this will appeal only to certain tastes and b.o. necessarily will be limited, but the anguished emotions will register powerfully with viewers receptive to brooding fare.

Set entirely within the lovely Vermont country home of Mia Farrow at summer's end, tale is constructed around a pattern of unrequited, mismatched infatuations that drive the high-strung, intellectual characters to distraction. Neighbor Denholm Elliott loves Farrow, Farrow is a goner for guesthouse occupant Sam Waterston, and Waterston is nuts for Farrow's best friend Dianne Wiest, who is married.

Also visiting are Farrow's mother, a former screen star and great beauty played by Elaine Stritch, and the latter's husband, physicist Jack Warden. Mother-daughter relationship represents the most surprising conceit in the picture, as a quarter-century before the action is set, at age 14, Farrow reputedly killed Stritch's sleazy lover, a situation that directly parallels the Lana Turner-Cheryl Crane true-life melodrama.

Farrow bears the double burden of her hopeless yearnings for Waterston and her lifelong resentment of her successful mother, who has weathered every storm and scandal and now lives in relative, if excessively alcoholic, contentment with her utterly stable husband. Unable to pull her career as a photographer together either, Farrow is in every way pitiful, but so vulnerable and sensitive that one is enormously drawn to her.

By contrast, Mama is one tough cookie, a survivor fed up with her daughter's neuroses who lashes back by saying, "If your life hasn't worked out, stop blaming me for it." Making matters worse, Stritch takes a fancy to Waterston and invites the adman and aspiring novelist to ghostwrite her memoirs, which inevitably will dwell extensively on the sordid details of the killing and Farrow's subsequent problems.

Whenever Farrow is out of view, Waterston comes on to Wiest, who is attracted and unhappy in her marriage, but reluctant to betray her already devastated closest chum. Half of Wiest's lines seem to be, "Please don't," as she must continually ward off her persistent suitor, and Farrow is forced to utter the same to Elliott, an impeccably civilized older man who knows his cause is

doomed, but still feels compelled to voice his feelings.

So it goes, a merry-go-round of frustration, resentment, heartbreak, disappointment and bitterness, described in brittle, often piercing terms in Allen's dialog. Happily, the air is cleared on occasion by the outrageous Stritch, whose rowdy, forthright comments never fail to lighten the mood and provide genuine amusement.

Allen sustains his desired tone most of the way, but everyone is so wound up that, toward the end, as all the frayed ends need to be tied up, the springs snap and a few of the exchanges emerge as unintentionally comical. One senses Allen walking a very narrow tightrope throughout, so that when he falters, it is extremely noticeable.

The writer-director also seems in too big a hurry to bring his film to a conclusion, underwriting a story so ripe with dramatic angles that it needed more time to breathe and fully come to life. The framework and characters are here, but the full potential hasn't been achieved.

Even so, there is ever-so-much to chew on for those willing to indulge the characters' angst and self-torture. The debts to Chekhov are everywhere, as Stritch resembles not only Lana Turner, but Arkadina in "The Sea Gull," the younger women recall ladies in other of the playwright's work, and Farrow is considering selling the Vermont *dacha* for a life in New York, which is discussed as a beckoning culture capital in very much the same terms as is Moscow in Chekhov.

Stritch, so seldom seen on the big screen, has the showiest role and makes the most of it, wisecracking to get through the day and speaking bluntly when it suits her. The character steamrolls over everybody, and the actress is an overpowering delight. Farrow is heart-wrenching in her portrayal of naked, undisguised pain, Wiest sharply gets across sexual desire overburdened by nervous anxiety, and Waterston evokes the requisite lust and weakness of his floundering writer. Elliott and Warden are fine in more uni-dimensional roles.

Lenser Carlo Di Palma's luminous palette creates an ironically warm context in which the abrasive relationships will play themselves out, and keeps the film visually interesting despite the limitation of the single set, wonderfully designed by Santo Loquasto. Susan E. Morse's editing is even too close to the bone. As usual with Allen, popular tunes from earlier in the century, notably Irving Berlin's "What'll I Do?" dominate the soundtrack.

This is the film Allen largely reshot with a significantly altered cast after feeling dissatisfied with his first version. Originally, Maureen O'Sullivan, Farrow's real mother, played the role finally filled by Stritch. Sam Shepard, then, briefly, Christopher Walken, had Waterston's part, and Elliott was first cast as the actress' husband, with Charles Durning in the role of the neighbor. —Cart.