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Woody Allen: You're the Top

By Andrew Sarris

HANNAH AND HER SISTERS. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. A Jack Rollins and Charles H. Joffe production released by Orion Pictures.

By now, almost everyone must be aware that advance viewers of *Hannah and Her Sisters* are unanimously singing its praises. The only question is whether it's Woody Allen's best film since *Manhattan* or his best film ever. Let me fudge the issue somewhat by asserting that as *Manhattan* was the great American film of the '70s, *Hannah and Her Sisters* is the great American film of the '80s.

I don't mean to imply that Allen has come to the Zeitgeist, but, rather, that the Zeitgeist has come to him. If an unsigned script identical to *Hannah and Her Sisters* had been submitted to the new breed of MBA movie moguls, they would have rejected the project as an irremedial violation of every "high concept" dictum. There are no adolescent male rites of passage, no bloodcurdling violence, no Cold War derring-do, no sci-fi, no car chases, hardly any special effects, and no gross kiddie slapstick. Just some heartbreakingly articulate people talking to each other with wit and feeling.

Hence, when I say Woody Allen is the top I'm not just clearing my throat so that Bobby Short (who sings in *Hannah*) can deliver a Cole Porter medley at Allen's doorstep. Even so, if I had the wherewithal to order such things, I would instruct Frank Sinatra to serenade Woody's most recent masterpiece with "I Did It My Way." Because that's what he has done, vis-à-vis the ever venal motion picture industry, more spectacularly than anyone since Chaplin. Allen is barely past his 50th birthday, with 14 films in a 17-year directorial career, and already Norman Mailer has introduced him at a PEN benefit as "l'auteur des auteurs cinématographiques."

Still, Woody may prefer not to think about being placed in the Pantheon just yet. He seems obsessed enough by death without having some catchpenny journalist consign him prematurely to immortality. Curiously, the moments in both *Manhattan* and *Hannah and Her Sisters* that ring most hollow are the moments in which he professes to come to terms with the Grim Reaper through an appreciation of Mozart, Louis Armstrong, the Marx Brothers, etc. Conversely, it's when he is fleeing most frantically from his own morbidity that his movies spring most gloriously to life. At his best, as he is in *Hannah*, Woody Allen is worthy of the comment Shaw made about Shakespeare: "The lot of the man who sees life truly and thinks about it romantically is despair."

Allen's own romanticism leaps out of his psyche and onto the screen in two contexts: Woman and New York. He has performed his alchemy with Mia Farrow (and Diane Keaton) many times in the past, and he's worked before with Dianne Wiest in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, but his amazing empathy here with Barbara Hershey has filled me with fresh wonder. Any man can love women and desire them, or at least desire to possess them, but rare is the film artist, male or female, nowadays especially, who genuinely likes women and is able to enjoy the spectacle of their less endearing drives and complexes.

As for Woody's ongoing love affair with New York, it proceeds uninterrupted in *Hannah* despite the absence of legendary cinematographer Gordon Willis for the first time in a decade of films and his replacement by Italian cameraman Carlo Di Palma. Just as the late Orson Welles demonstrated with cinematographer Stanley Cortez in *The Magnificent Ambersons* that *Citizen Kane* was not entirely the handiwork of Gregg Toland (or, for that matter, Herman J. Mankiewicz), so has Allen demonstrated with Di Palma in *Hannah* that if Willis supplied the lens for *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, Woody supplied the heart. I don't mean to denigrate either Willis or Toland, both of whom have been invaluable and indispensable artists in the collective creation that is cinema, but, rather, to explain my seeming turnaround on Allen as a soulful artist, and to put my previous reservations about his achievements in some sort of evolutionary perspective.



SCULPTURE: WAYNE WHITE/PHOTOGRAPH: STEVEN RUBIN

Woody with Mia, Barbara, and Dianne: a rare love affair with women and New York

For starters, I have never questioned Allen's wit, skill, insight, intelligence, intuition, talent, tenacity, etc., but New York is full of people with wit, skill, insight, intelligence, intuition, talent, tenacity, etc. In this age of extreme specialization, however, there are relatively few full-fledged renaissance men or women, despite a profusion of multiple-gig jacks-of-all-trades. Hence, when some of Woody's enthusiastic admirers likened his comic prose to Voltaire's and Dean Swift's, I quietly demurred. As for his few forays into the theater, I must say that Allen's plays make Neil Simon's look profound and open-ended.

I've always admired the quirkiness of Woody's professionally masochistic imagination, as when he explained how he played a language instruction record at the wrong speed, and was therefore prepared to spout a little torpid Castilian. The sheer bravado with which he flaunted his pseudoexpertise has stayed with me always as a reflection of his ability to make the audience an accomplice of his rueful inwardness. This may be why Joan Didion jumped on him so hard for being a parochial (i.e., New Yorkish and

New Yorkerish) name-dropper and culture vulture.

Though Didion published her critique of *Manhattan* in *The New York Review of Books*, her vantage point was that of the bemused, ultrasophisticated Californian, who assumed without actually spelling it out that movies, particularly, were a West Coast phenomenon and always would be, because California was where the rest of America was going, whereas New York was where Europe had been. Woody himself encouraged this kind of talk even among New Yorkers, what with his incessant acknowledgments of such art-house deities as Bergman and Fellini. His infatuation with Bergman attained its terminally soporific acme in *Interiors* and with Fellini in the joyless, sexless self-immolation of *Stardust Memories*. A *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* was an even feebler tribute to Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* than was Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*.

Then along came *Zelig*, and critics had to upgrade Allen all over again, but I found that most people didn't like the film as much as we had insisted they should. He had very shrewdly (at the time I thought kindly) arranged for individual, solitary screenings of this somewhat esoteric entertainment for the major New York critics. The perceptive encyclopedists of the British Film Institute's *Film Bulletin* theorized that we New York movie magistrates had been swallowed up by Allen's profitably hip, seemingly self-doubting ego. But both Didion and the British theorists underestimated the double-edged nature of Woody's alleged affinity with his hometown critics and admirers. After all, proximity as often breeds contempt as adula-

tion. Many of us undoubtedly envy his fabulous success just a little, and one would not be a certified New Yorker if one did not eagerly wait for an ostentatiously reclusive celebrity in our midst to make a false step.

In the dark days following *Stardust Memories*, Woody probably had his fill of well-wishers begging him to return to the carefree sloppiness of his "funny" movies like *Take the Money and Run*, *Bananas*, *Sleeper*, and *Love and Death*. This was strikingly similar to the advice Chaplin kept getting, from *The Gold Rush* to *The Great Dictator*, to return to the belly laughs of the Mack Sennett days. But Charlie, like Woody, kept the faith with his own sacredly romantic soul.

That is why Allen gets some of the richest and loudest laughs of his career in *Hannah*, when he finally materializes in his own mock-persona as a fearful hypochondriac at the mercy of the linguistic evasions of a medical establishment with all of the questions and few of the answers. We have already met Hannah (Mia Farrow), a delicate tower of strength next to her two almost hopelessly mixed-up sisters, Lee (Barbara Hershey), a wistful, guilt-ridden sexpot, and Holly (Dianne Wiest), a relentlessly neurotic careerist flying off furiously in all directions. The intrigues begin with the love-lust of Hannah's accountant husband Elliot (Michael Caine) for Lee, who in turn has her problems with her live-in lover and mentor, the formidable Frederick, a surly, superior, antisocial painter (Max von Sydow, a Bergmanesque presence to end Bergmanesque presences). Micky (Woody Allen) has been married to Hannah and has had one disastrous date with Holly, who in turn is betrayed by her "best" friend in a relationship with a flamboyantly courtly architect (Sam Waterston), who seems to encapsulate all of New York's eternal impermanence.

As it stands, I've not given more than an inkling of the intricacy and complexity of Allen's narrative and of all the dramatic cross-currents that drift across the screen. He ties together the destinies of close to a dozen characters without ever lapsing into sordidness or contrivance. Furthermore, all the characters grow before our eyes. Some read books, some write them, some take courses, and some let life take its course. All become a little wiser if not a lot happier.

Allen begins audaciously by edging into his exposition with Michael Caine, the would-be errant husband, as a point-of-view narrator describing his lustful feelings for his luscious-breasted sister-in-law. The big joke of this device is that the Caine character is far from being omniscient. He is pathetically self-absorbed, to the point that the rest of the film swirls around him without his taking any notice. The theme of betrayal, so decisive in *Manhattan*, is modulated here by an exquisitely universal befuddlement. And Allen does not cast himself in the role of a hypocritical moralist; instead he lets his characters, male and female both, play out their humors freely and imaginatively.

Woody Allen has been making movies long enough to understand the emotional dividends of what Bazin once described as doubling: the enhancement of the image on the screen by the reality off the screen. Every reader of the gossip columns knows by now that Mia Farrow is "family" both on and off the screen, and the casting of Mia's Hannah as an actress, and of her real mother, Maureen O'Sullivan, as her reel actress mother, forces the galvanized viewer to confront two sets of time. But the casting of the late Lloyd Nolan as Hannah's father contributes a ghostly poignancy to the family reunions that begin and end the film with the recapitulation of times remembered and loves reshuffled.

Sure, Allen has stylized and romanticized life in New York in order for his beautifully civilized characters to breathe the clean air of hope and regeneration. His Soho is on another planet from the Soho of Martin Scorsese and Joseph

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Minion in *After Hours*. Only his mordant humor disguises and makes palatable the fact that Allen is of an older generation supposedly out of sync with the MTV groupies. Who would have thought that he would turn out to be such a fanatically linear artist? His ability to appreciate the mature sexiness of Barbara Hershey placed me on his side at the outset, and his compassionate understanding of the self-deceiving randiness of the Michael Caine character and the superficial epicureanism of the Sam Waterston male flirt indicated a degree of generosity that was previously lacking even in *Manhat-*

tan. Finally, the enlightened forbearance he displays as both actor and filmmaker in coming to terms with the vulnerably wacko searcher of Dianne Wiest makes *Hannah and Her Sisters* almost as spiritually exalting an experience as Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* (though Allen's comically fragmented division of his story's segments can hardly be described as Chekhovian, and Allen himself seems always to be teetering more toward Kafka country).

Woody Allen should forget the literary life. His true métier is cinema. Only on the screen can he find the core and the locus that both express his deepest feelings and enable him to get out of his nail-

biting self-contemplation and deviously narcissistic self-deprecation. It turns out that Allen has more in common with movie "naturals" like Buster Keaton, Alfred Hitchcock, and particularly Billy Wilder than he would like to admit in public. His professed desire (confided to Caryn James of the *Times*) to make films "as good as" *The Bicycle Thief* and *Grand Illusion* is as wrong-headed a career objective as I could imagine for him. One *Interiors* is more than enough. Yet I suppose the wrong-headedness is part of the creative ferment that keeps him going at all in a murderously treacherous business, and he shouldn't be held accountable for every syllable in his interviews.

Fortunately, *Hannah and Her Sisters* seems more visceral than cerebral in its genesis, and its unforced luminosity should light up the whole moviegoing year. But who could have imagined back in the late '60s that Woody Allen would eventually eclipse Mike Nichols and Elaine May, both singly and collectively, as a maker of funny movies with heart and soul? Mea culpa! Some of my readers may recall that the late Kenneth Tynan once quoted me in *The New Yorker* to the effect that Mel Brooks was a "warmer" and less pinched artist than Allen. I hereby stand corrected. Nineteen eighty-six is already coming up roses on my beat, thanks to Woody, now and forever a true man of the cinema. ■