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# Is Fun City Woody Allen's Heartbreak Town?

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Mayor Koch should give Woody Allen the key to the city. (And if we know Mayor Koch, undoubtedly he will.) After all, no one has been a greater contributor to the "I Love New York" campaign than the city's literate, witty and immensely gifted native son. Where other moviemakers have trained their cameras almost exclusively on New York's terrors (think of the night-

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## On Film 1 "Manhattan"

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marish town served up by Martin Scorsese in "Taxi Driver," William Friedkin in "The French Connection," John Schlesinger in "Midnight Cowboy"), Mr. Allen in film after film has consistently and refreshingly focused instead on the city's pleasures—its culture, variety and excitement.

True, Mr. Allen's New York has a nervous, edgy quality about it as well—filled as it is with neurotics and pretenders—that makes it easy to poke fun at. But Mr. Allen's jokes, unlike those of Neil Simon, are never bitter about the Big Apple's worms. Rather, they are the kind of playful teasing which is bred of sympathy and affection.

Predictably, it's this same New York that we find in Mr. Allen's current film, "Manhattan." Only this time out, it serves not merely as the movie's setting. It is its

very subject, with the usual Allen-type love affair being less between his alter-ego hero (here, one Isaac Davis, writer of television comedy) and the hero's Diane Keaton opposite number (in this case, a Radcliffe-educated and Philadelphia-born journalist) than between Allen's alter-ego and the city itself.

Isaac, moreover, who tells us right at the outset that he "loves New York . . . adores New York," emerges an absolutely shameless lover. He sees his city in nostalgic black and white, and since the film reflects his vision, so do we. He imagines it, as he says and as we hear, "pulsating to the great tunes of George Gershwin." And he pictures its dramatic skyline with breathtaking fireworks exploding behind it. Isaac, together with one beautiful woman or another, takes rides through Central Park in a horse and buggy, walks by the East River at dawn under the stirring shadows of Manhattan Bridge and has romantic tete-a-tetes in one exquisitely photographed New York landmark after another (best of all, in the eerily dramatic halls of Hayden Planetarium).

New York, quite simply, has never looked so good, been such a delight both to live in and to visit. But if Woody Allen's art has proved a boon to the city, the city may be turning out to be somewhat less nourishing to Mr. Allen's art.

In this case, at least, it hasn't inspired in him (or in his co-scenarist, Marshall

Brickman) any new insights or any truly fresh material. For all its charm and appeal, "Manhattan" suffers from being too much the same thing all over again—"Annie Hall" given another run through. Once again, the film deals with those typical Allen types: novelists, journalists, scholars, TV writers, etc. who are hung up on discovering meaningful outlets for their talents and meaningful relationships with the opposite sex; who as a consequence are also hung up on their analysis; and who are mired in intellectual and other varieties of chic. (They chatter about Diane Arbus, Brecht and Van Gogh; hang out at Elaine's and go to parties for Bella Abzug at MOMA; and do all their shopping at Bloomie's.)

Once again, the film's hero, Isaac, is obsessed with his sexual conquests and defeats, while once again as well his story revolves around his winning and losing women: among them, his ex-wife (Meryl Streep); his current and momentary flame (Diane Keaton) who is also involved with his married best friend (Michael Murphy); and, making for the movie's only truly new twist, his truest love, a sweet little 17-year-old high school student (Mariel Hemingway) who if much his junior in years and experience seems infinitely his senior in emotional stability.

But "Manhattan" suffers from other than the fact that we feel we've seen it all before. It also is troubled by its shaky tone and fuzzy attitude. On the one hand, Mr. Allen's characters, thinly sketched exemplars of urban frailties and foibles that they are, would seem intended as comic creations. Certainly, they make us laugh—if only from sheer recognition. Yet, because they are frequently bathed in the same romantic light as their city and invested by the actors who play them with a disconcerting solemnity, these caricatures rather incongruously seem to be bearing the weight of serious statement.

Similarly, though Mr. Allen is evidently asking us to care a good deal about his self-absorbed and faithless types, he tells us little about them that would make them seem worthy of our concern. Even Mr. Allen's stand-in, Isaac, invites little empathy. Less appealingly vulnerable than his "Annie Hall" counterpart, he is also, at least in his treatment of the 17-year-old who truly loves him, quite cruelly cavalier.

The upshot of all these contradictory messages is, quite naturally, that we don't really know just how we are to take Isaac *et al.* or just what their story is supposed to add up to. Can Mr. Allen's point really be the old saw that Fun City is also Heartbreak Town?

Certainly, the film is somber enough to make us feel that, insubstantial material and laughs notwithstanding, Woody Allen wants more and more to be taken seriously. Yet even if his seriousness were more well-taken and fully earned than it is here, I doubt that many of us would be pleased. For it's not only much-maligned New York that has benefited from Woody Allen; it's also the long impoverished world of movie comedy. And what a loss to both should he ultimately defect.