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BOSTON AFTER DARK
ARTS &
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WOODY



TRIUMPHANT

by Owen Gleiberman

Midway through his exquisite new comedy, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Woody Allen utters what may be the most liberating declaration of his career. "I was in analysis for years," he says. "Nothing happened. The guy finally put in a salad bar." One chuckles, of course, at the familiar surrealism of Woody's wit. But a second later the joke's implication hits home. Woody Allen *not* in analysis? One might as soon believe Clint Eastwood had turned in his Magnum and become an apostle of nonviolence. Those endless sessions of head-shrinkage, more than anything else, symbolized the fog of self-absorption that enshrouds Allen's characters; hearing that he's outgrown the couch is like seeing someone rouse himself from a lifelong slumber.

Hannah and Her Sisters (at the Paris, the Harvard Square, and the Circle) is a beautifully orchestrated Manhattan ensemble comedy, and probably the first Allen picture in which the other characters are seen with the same love and understanding Allen lavishes on his own autobiographical obsessions. Part of the pleasure of the movie is the way it deepens our response to Allen's screen alter ego. Like *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, *Hannah* shows Woody growing in unexpected and exhilarating ways — he's more vulnerable, more courageous, more human. If he's

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Hannah

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still searching for the perfect mate, still chewing over his old meaning-of-life dilemmas, it's with a new urgency, with the quivering awareness of a man who has eased into middle age realizing he'd better find a few answers (and modify his idea of perfection) before he runs out of time. But Woody is merely a supporting player now, acting out his cosmic problems away from center stage, like a Jewish-neurotic Greek chorus. And watching him off by himself, you realize that's the perfect place for him — it's where he's always lived. Shunting his own preoccupations to the side, Allen has freed himself as a dramatist. His serious pretensions are no longer warring with his comic impulses; as in Chekhov, or the Ingmar Bergman of *Smiles of a Summer Night*, they've coalesced into a single embracing vision.

In its form and style, *Hannah and Her Sisters* bears an obvious similarity to *Manhattan*. Once again, we're in New York City — that is, Woody's New York, the bittersweet urban paradise full of spangly streets and romantic '40s pop music. Once again, we follow a crew of aimless, tirelessly "self-aware" intellectuals as they fall in and out of love, weigh desire against commitment, complain about how lonely they are and then scurry back to the cozy isolation of their apartments. What's changed is that, partly because the characters are no longer orbiting around Woody, there's a new sense of freedom and possibility in their follies; if the lovelorn crew in *Manhattan* kept "creating all sorts of neurotic problems for themselves" to avoid confronting the abyss, *Hannah's* characters keep screwing up because, in their own blind-sided way, they're truly groping for happiness.

Hannah is about Hannah (Mia Farrow) and her two sisters, Lee (Barbara Hershey) and Holly (Dianne Wiest), and also about their husbands, lovers, children, parents. The movie teems with characters, and the way Allen has divided it into neat vignettes, each one introduced by a dryly humorous title card, every new scene is a tale in itself. At the opening cocktail party, we learn that Elliot (Michael Caine), Hannah's financial-adviser husband, is fatally infatuated with Lee. One look at the ravishing Barbara Hershey convinces you he has every reason to be. Hershey, who barely registered in movies like *Boxcar Bertha* and *The Stunt Man*, is a revelation here. Physically, she could be Sigourney Weaver's twin, but she doesn't have a trace of the patrician reserve that can make Weaver's characters so drably "cool." Hershey is all sweetness and fire, with a dimply smile that can melt any and all comers, even as her firm stare sizes them up.

Lee is an earnest self-improver, not especially insecure, yet worshipful of her live-in lover — a bitter and excruciatingly high-minded artist (Max von Sydow) who adores her and despises everyone else. Von Sydow is hilarious delivering his misanthropic tirades (he's the kind of guy who flips on the tube and says, "Can you imagine the level of a mind that watches wrestling?"). And Lee seems at home in their glorified mentor/student relationship — at least, until Elliot begins pursuing her madly. Allen has siphoned all his schlub-romantic impulses into the Caine character. Slumped against a wall with lust, the compleat marital hypocrite, he wants Lee so badly he's dying, and you root for him, even as you're wincing at his stumblebum attempts at courtship. Is there an actor alive who invites as much immediate empathy as Michael Caine? Allen gives him a beautiful running gag: we keep hearing Caine in voiceover telling us what valiant thing he's about to do (or refrain from doing) in pursuit of his beloved; a second later, he'll completely contradict what he just said, standing there in agonized silence when he should be pouring out his passion, or making a lunge for Hershey when von Sydow is in the next room. His advances finally pay off, but surprise, surprise: as soon as Elliot and Lee begin meeting in hotel rooms, he's the one who has second thoughts.

As the adulterous hubbub goes on, the film keeps cutting over to Allen himself as Hannah's ex-husband, Mickey, the head writer for a *Saturday Night Live*-style comedy show, and a hypochondriac who discovers the

worst: he may be dying. Allen plays his first doctor's appointment perfectly. Trying to tell the physician about which ear he's lost some hearing in, he babbles uncontrollably, his hand flicking from one ear to the other — for the first time, Allen acts fear and anxiety without putting a parodistic edge on it. As it begins to look as if Mickey might have a brain tumor, the movie spirals downward in comic dread. The thought of poor Woody wasting away before our eyes is queasy indeed, yet the humor lies in the idea that life is playing an almos: justifiable joke on him — that the eternal paranoid hypochondriac submits to a fate he feels, in a way, he's brought on himself. There's always been something untouchably abstract in Woody Allen's compulsive search for "meaning." Here, for the first time, he suggests the true root of his obsession with



Lloyd Nolan and Maureen O'Sullivan: a feel for the undercurrents of familial resentment

death — that for someone who feels he's missed out on life to begin with, the prospect of nothingness is going to seem even grimmer. In *Hannah*, it's as if Allen's anhedonia, that perverse force that keeps him (at least onscreen) from experiencing pleasure, were now threatening to oust him from the planet. Mickey's brush with mortality sends him on a wild soul-searching mission; his attempts to join the Roman Catholic Church, and even the Hare Krishnas, are as delightfully absurd as they are pathetic, but beneath the gag you can sense that something has been triggered. Mickey must learn to look at life through new eyes — if not, it's going to be the (spiritual) death of him.

Hannah is full of delicate portents of aging, death, compromise — of the limits life imposes; yet they don't weigh things down. The movie ushers in a more mature period for Allen, much as *Annie Hall* signaled a graduation from his madcap-anarchic classics of the early '70s. And if anything, he embraces the world with greater force than before. (His movement from comic to "artist" seems inevitable now; I can't imagine even wanting him to try to top *Bananas* over and over.) Allen's usual cinematographer, Gordon Willis, wasn't available this time, but Carlo Di Palma, who shot Antonioni's *Red Desert*, evokes Willis's effervescent urban style and then some. The streets of SoHo have never looked this softly colorful on screen. And Di Palma, unlike Willis, keeps the camera moving; it dances around, taking in six characters at a party in a single choreographed swoop or spinning through the street to track some mad romantic's stumbling odyssey.

At first, Mia Farrow's Hannah doesn't come across. A successful theater actress who has taken a leave from the stage to start a family, she's an anachronism — a Woody Allen character who has everything she wants out of life, who claims she's perfectly contented and means it. But Allen is less interested in exploring the inner life of this quietly satisfied and nurturing woman than in charting her effect on the less fortunate souls around her. Farrow's initial "not coming across" turns out to be an Allen master stroke — it puts the audience in the position of Elliot, who cherishes the stability he found with her but goes a little crazy in the face of her placid self-sufficiency. She doesn't seem to need him (at least not the way he needs her), and even as you stare at

Farrow and admire her beauty and tenderness, Elliot's complaint can't be shaken off. In Allen's skittery, tumultuous world, the very lack of neurosis registers as a hole in your personality.

Hannah isn't perfect, either. A sanctimonious streak comes out in her dealings with Holly, a coke-sniffing nervous wreck whose sketchy career as an actress is merely a cover-up for her transparent lack of direction. Holly is the loser of the family (though no one says so aloud), the kind of dizzily inefficient person who's buzzing with so many half-baked plans that just listening to her ramble on about her latest misguided venture is a trial. And Hannah, the family princess, tries to help her out and — at the same time — subtly twist the knife by doling out good, sane, practical advice that Holly is too frazzled to follow. Dianne Wiest gives the most blazingly eccentric performance in the movie; in a few scenes, she comes close to walking off with it. Delivering her lines in a spacy, little-girl quaver that can suddenly lash out in anger, she makes her vagueness touching, even tragic. Holly is around 40 yet still unformed, her jangly nerves aching for some force — a job, a man, anything — to pull them together. As siblings, Wiest and Farrow are matched in mysteriously convincing ways. They have a complementary delicacy, a plaintive softness that draws them both back, away from the world. One restaurant scene is a tour de force of staging, as the camera circles the table like a hawk, taking in the three sisters' faces with voyeuristic precision as they shed their decorum and yield to old resentments. At moments like this, and in the scenes with the sisters' parents, an aging but still glamorous show-biz couple (played by Farrow's real-life mother, Maureen O'Sullivan, and the avuncular Lloyd Nolan) whose living-room performances around the piano for packs of relatives counterpoint their hateful squabbles, Allen shows a feel for the undercurrents of familial resentment and need that recalls passages in Chekhov and O'Neill.

My only gripe with the movie (it's been a problem in other Allen films) is that the resolutions are somewhat programmed. It's easy to accept that Elliot really loves Hannah, but we don't see enough of what he gets from her to experience his rediscovery of the marriage as an emotional surge. More seriously: when the distraught Holly finally lands herself a man, it seems a bit of a cheat that there's barely a heartfelt conversation between

them. And wouldn't the match have been more inspiring if Holly hadn't turned out to be a terrific author — i.e., a more viable mate? She's redeemed, a little too glibly, by her hidden talent. For all that, the very end of the movie is meant to be a leap of faith. And it works, sublimely, because Allen, having recited yet another version of his speech about how it's the little things (like Marx Brothers movies) that make life worthwhile, enriches his own screen image with a tenderness he's never dared show before. The miracle of *Hannah's* conclusion is that Woody Allen does better than answer the big questions — he says goodbye to anhedonia. □