

Manhattan Murder Mystery

There are some film fans who felt Woodie Allen lost his true comic essence somewhere in the late 1970's--after *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*--before he got wrapped up in more somber and philosophic moods. For these folks, his latest opus, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, should fondly recall his "Pre-Mia" period. Besides the endearing dippiness of old sidekick Diane Keaton, this film features familiar Woodie one-liners, his patented kvetching, and a performance best described as the Return of the Nebbish.

As one who has been an earnest, if not uncritical, devotee of Woodie Allen for 20 years and over just as many films, I would place *Manhattan Murder Mystery* in the middling range, the quality and count of the jokes not up to his best comedies of the 1970's and the richness of character and incident not matching his best dramas from the 1980's. Still, the landscape and the language of Allentown should be familiar and pleasurable to people who know the address.

The novelty of this Allen effort may be the plot: there is one and rather elaborate one at that. This may be because, also for the first time in more than a decade, Allen has a co-screenwriter, the veteran Marshall Brickman. Instead of the usual fandango of "relationships" and the parrying of wary couples, Allen almost immediately introduces the first thread of the murder plot--an abrupt death--and develops it through the ever-more ornate imaginings of Keaton's character.

Book editor Larry Lipton (Allen) and his wife Carol (Keaton) have just met a middle-aged couple in their uptown apartment building, when they learn that the wife of the couple has died suddenly of a heart attack the very next day. Upon later commiserating with the widower, Mr. House (Jerry Adler), Carol feels he lacks a sense of grief and begins to muse on whether he might have murdered her. Egged on by family friend Ted (Alan Alda), a flaky actor/playwright and divorcee who is gingerly coming on to Carol, she begins to concoct motives for a murder. Encountering House occasionally, she finds inconsistencies in his stories. Nerdy Larry tries to deter her at every turn, scared of getting involved as well as spooked by a city where, he laments, serial killers are seen as "an alternative lifestyle choice." Carol even goes so far as to sneak into House's apartment, which offers the director a chance to construct a suspenseful cat-and-mouse sequence. And just when all her leads seem to be coming to a dead end, Carol spots none other than the "dead" Mrs. House on a bus, thus kicking the plot into another gear.

That plot thickens with the introduction of mystery writer Marsha Fox (Anjelica Huston), whose editor is Larry. A cocksure plot-meister herself, she comes up with modes and means for the murder which Carol embraces--and which ultimately draw in the terrified Larry. From here on we move into realms seldom seen in Woodie Allen: dead bodies on elevators, corpses cremated in fiery ovens, a noisy shoot-out in a movie house.

While Allen's film looks autumnal and amber, he also dips his story occasionally into *film noir*. One of the classics of the genre, *Double Indemnity*, sets the mood early when Larry and Carol go to see it the night of Mrs. House's demise. As a finale, there is a lengthy and complex homage to Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai*. Moviegoers

familiar with the film will nod in recognition at how Woodie and cinematographer Carlo di Palma have recast Welles' famous funhouse mirror sequence onto and into the cast-off mirrors of an old movie palace. Cinema recreating--and duplicating--cinema.

Allen's new plot consciousness produces some effective set pieces, like the scene mentioned above where Carol narrowly escapes discovery in House's apartment. The best of them to my mind is an elaborately set-up telephone conversation-by-audiotape with the murder suspect, where he unwittingly talks with a battery of tape recorders held by all of the principals. Intricate and clever, it both advances the plot and is very funny. A timely line near the climax of this exchange about something "refrigerated" is liable to bring out the biggest laugh in the show.

A minor subtheme carries over from numerous other Allen films: the familiar struggle with "relationships." Perhaps too familiar. Carol, getting an unaccustomed rush from running down her mystery, wonders out loud and often about her too predictable marriage and her now fuddy-duddy husband. More and more in tune with Ted, who shares her unease and goofiness, she whines about Larry's avoidance of adventure and lack of spirit. This is familiar "Is that all there is?" territory. We are back in the world of crumpling couples, the milieu of *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and Allen's last, and somewhat feverish effort, *Husbands and Wives*.

Both Allen and Keaton play riffs on their personages created in earlier films. Their fans will revel in Woodie's adjusting his glasses before a trenchant quip or in Keaton's throaty, embarrassed "yeah" while in a tipsy mood. Alan Alda is appropriate as a somewhat smirky, always insincere New York type, a guy who has, according to Larry, "a mind like a steel sieve." His one long-held sappy grin in a scene where he and Carol are staking out a suspect says tons about his character. Huston's Marsha is an urban Amazon, confident and dominant, who brooks no nonsense and plays poker like a riverboat gambler. Jerry Adler, a longtime theatrical producer in only his second film role, is most natural and convincing--he's as plain and as dense as a bagel.

Woodie-philes will find much that is comforting in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*. A score replete with classic pop and jazz, loving shots of those less-than-mean-streets, tossed-off movie references and tossed-off one-liners--all the minutiae of the city from the Rangers hockey team to the restaurant "Elaines." This is tried and well-trod Allen ground and his fans will want to go visit. As Woodie himself says at one point after being roused out of bed at 1:00 AM: "This is the town that never sleeps; that's why we don't live in Duluth."

(August 1993)