

Match Point

Call it “Woody Does London.” Yes, Woody Allen, the Manhattan untermensch, has offered up a surprising change of pace in locale and tone if not in subject matter in his latest film *Match Point*. What hasn’t changed is his intense focus on the changing climate of relationships and the shifting humors of love among a small group of people.

Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) is a middling tennis professional who has left the tour to give lessons at a tony club. Though he believes in luck, he is also one to help it along. A well-to-do client, Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode) becomes a friend, and Chris, slyly ambitious, comes to move easily into the Hewett family circle, which includes dad (Brian Cox), who provides him a good job, supportive mum (Penelope Wilton), and sunny sister Chloe (Emily Mortimer) who falls for Chris’s confident, slightly dangerous manner. In the mix, too, is Tom’s fiancé, a struggling American actress in London, Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson).

Chris’s life sweetens as he woos Chloe and wins her, but he wants even more, including the surpassingly beautiful Nola. The bulk of the film contrasts the easy choreography of Chris’s new life and marriage with the nervous dance he conducts in his passion for the elusive Nola. Eventually, his affair--and Nola’s insistent demands on him--begins to endanger his newly cushy lifestyle. His desire to cut off the persistent dame will, rightly, remind filmgoers who know Allen of his great *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

For one familiar with his films, the movie may seem surprising at first, not obviously a “Woody film.” Yet, over its playing time, elements of the Allen style assert themselves. His standard theme has already been cited. Another is his belief in an uncaring God--or no God--and a world that can turn so arbitrarily on chance. There is also his sense of urban setting (with the “urb” being London rather than New York) which features more neighborhoods than landmarks. Within this new cityscape, he still favors the small-town feel, where protagonists can run across each other readily in cafes, art galleries, on the street. Also, his characters move in a privileged world, one of affluence and good taste and arty jobs. These and other parallels will make the picture seem familiar and not so dramatic a change of pace.

Still, one might ask, is *Match Point* funny? The answer is no; this time the vagaries of troubled relationships--that dominant theme--are played straight. Moreover, he has not placed himself or any proxy-Woody into the mix, as he has does in numerous films and as he did with his last film *Melinda and Melinda*, where Will Ferrell performed the comic shtick. The story isn’t tragic, either, though it culminates in what, for Allen, is shocking violence. It is mostly real and believable, aided enormously by a smart script and some fine acting.

That fine acting is led by Rhys Meyers (the nice guy coach in *Bend It Like Beckham*) as Chris, a smooth prole who is out to get his by adaptation and ingratiation. His smoldering good looks match his hyper-attuned antennae as his wins over the Hewett family (only the outsider Nola really sniffs him out), though he gives way convincingly also to a man in a panic, eventually crushed by contending desires. Scarlett Johansson is appropriately luminous as Nola, with a nice edge of uncertainty and mystery in her character, who must turn into the spurned one. Mortimer is the necessary third part of the triangle, so blithely sweet and blithely unaware as Chloe, a

woman smitten enough with her wonderful find of a husband to not notice his perfidy. Not to forget, by the way, a lovely last chapter turn by James Nesbitt as a feisty London police detective who gets involved with Chris's case. His is a nice update of the kind of police figure that would have been played by John Williams in a 1950's movie.

"I'd rather be lucky than good" is Chris's motto, and, in Woody Allen's first major venture across the pond, that turns out precisely to be the case.

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