

The Buffalo Film Seminars



Written and directed by Woody Allen
Produced by Robert Greenhut
Cinematography by Sven Nykvist
Film Editing by Susan E. Morse

Bill Bernstein...Testimonial Speaker
Martin Landau...Judah Rosenthal
Claire Bloom...Miriam Rosenthal
Stephanie Roth Haberle...Sharon Rosenthal
Gregg Edelman...Chris
George J. Manos...Photographer
Anjelica Huston...Dolores Paley
Woody Allen...Cliff Stern
Jenny Nichols...Jenny
Joanna Gleason...Wendy Stern
Alan Alda...Lester
Sam Waterston...Ben
Zina Jasper...Carol
Dolores Sutton...Judah's Secretary
Joel Fogel...T.V. Producer
Donna Castellano...T.V. Producer
Thomas Crowe...T.V. Producer
Mia Farrow...Halley Reed
Martin S. Bergmann...Prof. Louis Levy
Caroline Aaron...Barbara
Kenny Vance...Murray
Jerry Orbach...Jack Rosenthal
Jerry Zaks...Man on Campus
Barry Finkel...T.V. Writer
Steve Maidment...T.V. Writer
Nadia Sanford...Alva
Chester Malinowski...Hit Man
Stanley Reichman...Chris's Father
Rebecca Schull...Chris's Mother
David S. Howard...Sol Rosenthal
Garrett Simowitz...Young Judah
Frances Conroy...House Owner
Anna Berger...Aunt May
Sol Frieder...Seder Guest
Justin Zaremby...Seder Guest
Marvin Terban...Seder Guest
Hy Anzell...Seder Guest

Woody Allen (Allen Konigsberg, 1 December 1935, Brooklyn, NY) has made nearly one movie a year for the past 40 years. **From Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia:** "His first movie job, as screenwriter and actor in 1965's *What's New Pussycat?*, instantly made him a demi-con of the swinging sixties. In 1966's ingenious *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* Allen and several character actors (including his then-wife Louise Lasser) dubbed ridiculous dialogue onto an already silly-looking Japanese spy thriller. When making his first film as a director, the crime-documentary parody *Take the Money and Run* (1969), Allen had to be convinced to squelch a doomy, portentous side

November 20, 2007 (XV:13)

Woody Allen: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* 1989 104 minutes

CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS



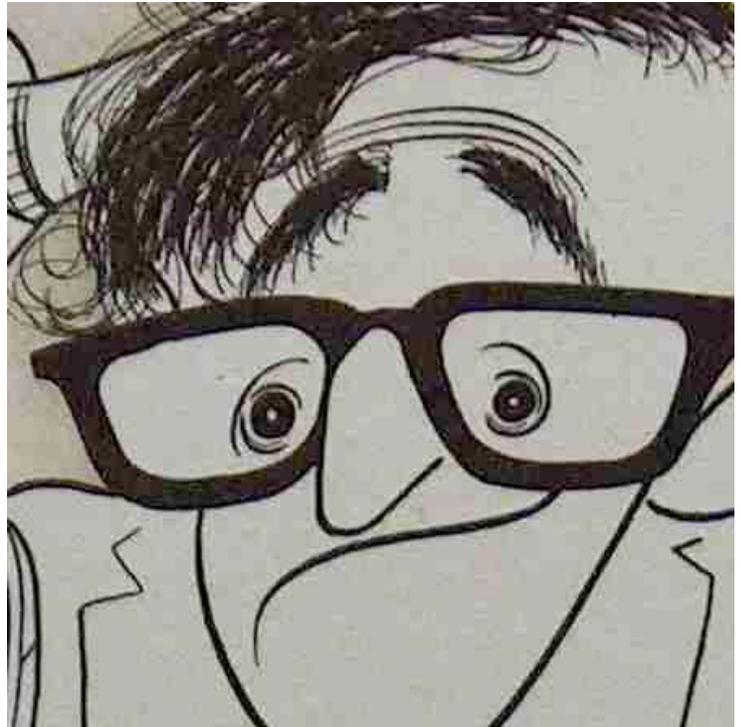
CAROLINE AARON ALAN ALDA
WOODY ALLEN CLAIRE BLOOM
MIA FARROW JOANNA GLEASON
ANJELICA HUSTON MARTIN LANDAU
JENNY NICHOLS JERRY ORBACH
SAM WATERSTON "CRIMES
AND MISDEMEANORS"

A JACK ROLLINS : CHARLES H. JOFFE PRODUCTION
CASTING BY JULIET TAYLOR EDITURE DESIGNER JEFFREY KURLAND
EDITORS SUSAN E. MORSE A.C.E. PRODUCTION DESIGNER SANTO LOQUASTO
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JACK ROLLINS DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY SVEN NYKVIST A.S.C.
AND PRODUCED BY CHARLES H. JOFFE ROBERT GREENHUT
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Sylvia Kauders...Seder Guest
Victor Argo...Detective
Lenore Loveman...Wedding Guest
Nora Ephron...Wedding Guest
Sunny Keyser...Wedding Guest
Merv Bloch...Wedding Guest
Nancy Arden...Wedding Guest
Thomas L. Bolster...Wedding Guest
Myla Pitt...Wedding Guest
Robin Bartlett...Wedding Guest
Grace Phillips...Bride
Randy Aaron Fink...Groom
Rabbi Dr. Joel Y. Zion...Rabbi
Daryl Hannah...Lisa Crosley
Wanda Toscanini Horowitz...Herself
Mercedes Ruehl...Party Guest

to which he gave free rein in later works. *Money's* editor, Ralph Rosenblum, recalled that its first cut ended with Allen being slaughtered, à la *Bonnie and Clyde*, in a scene completely at odds with the rest of the movie.

"After *Money* came a series of dazzling comedies—*Bananas* (1971), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*but were afraid to ask)* (1972), *Sleeper* (1973), *Love and Death* (1975)—in which Allen honed his Manhattan schlemiel persona to a fine edge while reveling in absurdist gags, outlandish situations, and pointed social satire. 1977's *Annie Hall* was a breakthrough movie; while very funny, it was also a serious and often moving look at modern urban romance, and it won Allen a Best Director Oscar (he shared the Academy's Best Screenplay Oscar with cowriter Marshall Brickman, and was also nominated for Best Actor). From that point on, Allen's films became more serious, starting with *Interiors* (1978), a heavy, Bergman-influenced drama which he wrote and directed but did not star in. The film, replete with selfconscious, straight-out-of-film-school visual compositions, was neither an artistic nor commercial success (although it received several Oscar nominations including Best Director and Screenplay), but seemed to provide Allen with the tools needed to blend comedy and drama. He's done that with varying degrees of success in all his subsequent films, which he makes at the steady rate of one a year.



"*Manhattan* (1979), a bittersweet romantic comedy that painted New York City in nostalgic black-and-white and underscored its scenes with Gershwin music, was critically and commercially successful, and snagged him another Academy Award nomination for Best Screenplay. In the acerbic and candid self-portrait *Stardust Memories* (1980) he poked fun at those who yearned for his "earlier, funnier" films, then responded with *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982) and the ingenious *Zelig* (1983) in which he played a human chameleon (thanks to some delicious cinematic sleight-of-hand). *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), and *Radio Days* (1987) garnered him more Oscar nominations for screenwriting. He nailed one for *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), one of his most mature films, and one of his biggest box office successes. His dramatic efforts from this period, *September* (1987) and *Another Woman* (1988), were marred by the same heavy-handedness he'd displayed in *Interiors* and were not well received. 1989's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* however, showed him back in form, albeit with a curious, existentialist opus that dispelled the notion that evil deeds never remain unpunished; it was a startling concept that he made not only convincing but, at times, uproariously funny. *Alice* (1990), a starring vehicle for his former love, Mia Farrow, had moments of brilliance but was on the whole very ordinary. *Shadows and Fog* (1992), another downbeat, leaden drama, found critics impatient with Allen's relentless efforts to recast himself as an American Bergman; it won the director some of his most uncomplimentary reviews.

"Allen was married to Louise Lasser, who appeared in several of his earlier films, and then had long-term relationships with leading lady Diane Keaton and with Mia Farrow, who appeared in almost all of his 1980s pictures. Farrow and Allen had one son together, but became international gossip fodder in 1992 when he was forced to admit a romantic liaison with her adopted daughter Soon-Yi Previn; she subsequently accused him of sexually molesting their child. This unprecedented publicity brouhaha (for two extremely private people) gave unexpected notoriety to Allen's concurrently released *Husbands and Wives* (1992), an excellent film that nonetheless caused snickering at many showings because of "leading" dialogue between Allen and Farrow. He then called on Diane Keaton to replace Farrow in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), his lightest comedy in years, and earned Oscar nominations for directing and cowriting *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994), the wryly comic tale of a young playwright at odds with the New York theatre world in the 1920s. He then turned to TV, directing, writing and starring in an adaptation of his play "Don't Drink the Water" (1994), and then acting opposite Peter Falk in an updated version of Neil Simon's "The Sunshine Boys" (1995).

"Back in 1967 he costarred in the all-star James Bond spoof *Casino Royale* as "Jimmy" Bond, but in the intervening years he has rarely appeared in films he hasn't also written and directed himself. There have been a few notable exceptions: *Play It Again, Sam* (1972), adapted from his delightful hit Broadway play, which he performed many times on stage; *The Front* (1976), in which he was ideally cast as a nebbish who fronts for blacklisted writers during the McCarthy era; and Paul Mazursky's *Scenes from a Mall* (1991), in which he was amusingly and improbably cast as an I-live-in-L.A.-and-like-it lawyer (complete with pony tail!) opposite Bette Midler. It was an endearing and accomplished performance which, unfortunately, was not supported by an equally accomplished script. He also appeared briefly in Jean-Luc Godard's odd, experimental *King Lear* (1987)."

Since the Maltin notes were written, Allen has directed 14 more films: *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008, in post-production), *Cassandra's Dream* (2007), *Scoop* (2006), *Match Point* (2005), *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), *Anything Else* (2003), *Hollywood Ending* (2002), *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* (2001), *Small Time Crooks* (2000), *Sweet and Lowdown* (1999), *Celebrity* (1998), *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) and *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995).



from World Film Directors Vol. II. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1988

American director, scenarist, actor, humorist, and dramatist. At fifteen, he started sending one-line jokes to the newspaper columnists Earl Wilson and Walter Winchell, and these were frequently published (though often with attribution to established celebrities instead of Allen. This success led to a job with a public relations firm that supplied comic material to Bob Hope, Arthur Murray, Guy Lombardo, and other entertainers. Allen graduated from Midwood High School in Brooklyn and, after one semester at New York University (where he failed his only film course), left for Hollywood to join NBC's writers' program. At nineteen he married Harlen Rosen, whom he had known in high school, and began working as a writer for Sid Caesar, Ed Sullivan, and *The Tonight Show*. During this period he was also reading a great deal of literature and philosophy, for a time hiring a private tutor. (Perhaps it is not surprising that Allen holds a "very, very dim view of the American educational system.")

By 1960 Allen was divorced and living in New York City. Tired of putting his best gags into other comics' mouths and, with the encouragement of his managers and future producers Jack Rollins and Charles Joffe, came out from behind his typewriter as a stand-up comedian in his own right. He performed for little or no pay at Greenwich Village nightclubs like *The Duplex*, *The Bitter End*, and *The Blue Angel*, and though he likened his interactions with his audiences to an "intimate relationship between Sisyphus and his stone," and later described this as a very lonely, frustrating period of his life, these early improvisational performances laid the groundwork for his confessional style of humor.

In fact, Allen was a success from the outset, and his reputation grew rapidly over the next four years, bringing him national press coverage and very large fees. His club and campus work was preserved on three long-play records, twice reissued as two-record sets. He based his routines on those of Bob Hope, Mort Sahl, and Nichols and May, all of whom adopted the "schnook" or victim stance in their comedy. Woody Allen is a small man—five feet, six inches tall, and "a little less slender than the

microphone"—with receding red hair and large eyeglasses. His face is habitually drawn into an expression of mournful anxiety close to panic, and his body "bent like a question mark," suggests a strong desire to bolt. In halting monologues he confessed his troubles with women, analysts, schoolyard bullies, Park Avenue doormen (his own included), and other real or imagined authority figures.

Much of Allen's nightclub humor was built on what he called "the urban Jewish mentality...of being wracked with guilt and suffering, of feeling one step ahead of trouble and anxiety," but he mocked all religions, as well as such institutions as marriage and Jewish family life, art and intellectualism, liberal politics, and conservative politics, sparing no one, least of all himself. Diane Jacobs has said that Allen's stage persona made "a virtue of his innate shyness, proclaiming his vulnerability in unctuous disclaimers, confessions and well-charted stammers—the idea being, who could attack this creature?" Richard Schickel has described Allen as "a walking compendium of a generation's concerns, comically stated," who leaves us feeling "that our own interior monologues have been tapped and are being broadcast." And Pauline Kael writes that he "made the whole country more aware of the feelings of those who knew they could never match the images of WASP perfection that saturated their lives...[He] helped people feel more relaxed about the way they looked...their sexual terrors, and everything else that made them anxious.

Allen established his public image so successfully that from this point in his career onward, audiences and critics would treat the man and his stage-screen persona as one. Despite disclaimers, Woody Allen is seen as the same nebbish he plays and writes about, and he is clearly not bothered by the confusion enough to fight it. He encourages it, in fact, by equipping every character he plays—nineteenth-century Russian or 1980s New Yorker, man or child—with his trademark: his own black-rimmed glasses. The illusion that we are watching films not only by but "about" Woody Allen is heightened by the fact that he generally casts his real-life companion (Diane Keaton, Mia Farrow) as his female lead.

Allen's immersion in the cinema began in 1964 when Charles K. Feldman caught his act and hired him to work on several films, beginning with the immensely successful *What's New, Pussycat?* This broad sexual farce was written by Allen—who also played one of the three leads—but was controlled by Feldman and director Clive Donner; so much so that Allen later said of this and the two Feldman movies which followed that "these were not my films." *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* of 1966 and *Casino Royale* of 1967 were both co-written by Allen, and the first, a Japanese spoof of the James Bond movies improbably dubbed with a Jewish-American soundtrack, was credited to Allen as "re-release director." *Casino Royale*, a would-be comic adaptation of a James Bond novel, featured Allen in only two brief scenes. Allen apparently sued to prevent the release of *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* Which he "hated," but without success.

While finishing work on the Feldman films, Allen wrote the stage play *Don't Drink the Water...* Allen's second Broadway play, *Play It Again, Sam* (1969), is a sort of fleshing-out of his nightclub "loser" character. Allen starred as film critic Allan Felix (the first of many writers he would create and play). Felix has been recently deserted by both his analyst and his wife, the latter explaining: "I can't stand the marriage. I don't find you fun. I feel you suffocate me...and I don't dig you physically. For God's sake don't take it personal." Felix invokes the spirit of his idol

Humphrey Bogart as his adviser and role model in matters of love, and the play blends reality and fantasy with deadpan facility....

As his reputation as comic and writer became established, Allen began to insist upon, and be granted, a high degree of creative autonomy in his filmmaking, and his favorite themes are evident even in the earliest of his “independent” films—the two short movies he made for a CBS television special in 1969. In “Cupid’s Shaft,” parodying *City Lights*, we see Allen as a Chaplinesque young loser pursued by the temporarily amnesiac Candice Bergen (he loses her when she comes to her senses. The other short, derived from *Pygmalion*, has Allen as a bogus rabbi hired to educate a beautiful young ignoramus (Bergen again) and seducing her in the process. In the end, he successfully passes her off as “one of the country’s leading pseudo-intellectuals” at the “annual Norman Mailer cocktail party” meanwhile demolishing the intellectual pretensions of his audience and himself. What Michael Dempsey calls “the comic defense mechanism” that pervades these works, fending off serious implications, and their characteristic mixture of reality and fantasy, prefigure Allen’s work of the next two decades.

Allen’s first feature as director was *Take the Money and Run*, completed in 1969 and produced by Charles Joffe for Palomar Pictures....Speaking many years later, Allen said of his earliest films that he had enjoyed just being funny: technical polish and innovation were as yet of little importance to him.

Allen himself has pointed out that in his second feature *Bananas* (1971), there are scenes that resemble those in Abbott and Costello or Bob Hope comedies. However, if the style was familiar, the content was not. In *Bananas* Allen plays an American who stumbles into a revolution in a fictional Latin American country and gets to be President. The film sends up the mass media (Howard Cosell appears as “sportscaster for the revolution”) as well as the American government (“This time the CIA’s not taking any chances,” we learn. “Half will support the dictator, half the rebels.”) This satire confirmed a decided difference between Allen’s film persona and that of Charlie Chaplin, with whom Allen is sometimes compared. While each uses sight gags and functions as both perpetrator and victim of comic mishaps, Chaplin was above all an acrobatic clown, relying on physical humor. Allen is primarily a verbal, even a cerebral comic, and it is his delivery of lines that establishes his persona. Allen himself once said, “I can’t tell you what I am, but I can tell you what I’m not: Chaplinesque.”

Allen has also been compared to other predecessors: to Buster Keaton in his taste for the absurd; to Groucho Marx in his aggressive humor; and to Harpo for the mix of angel and satyr. However the clowning antics of earlier eras tended to parody social mores; those of the late 1960s and the 1970s often vivisected the mass media, including, of course, the cinema itself. Gerald Mast has pointed out that *Take the Money and Run* makes fun of *Bonnie and Clyde* (a mythopoetic gangster drama), *In Cold Blood* (a psychological portrait of a criminal), *Modern Times* (the experiences of an oddball in jail), and particularly the look of *cinéma vérité*, newly popular in the late 1960s....His third film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*but were afraid to ask)* was released in 1972.

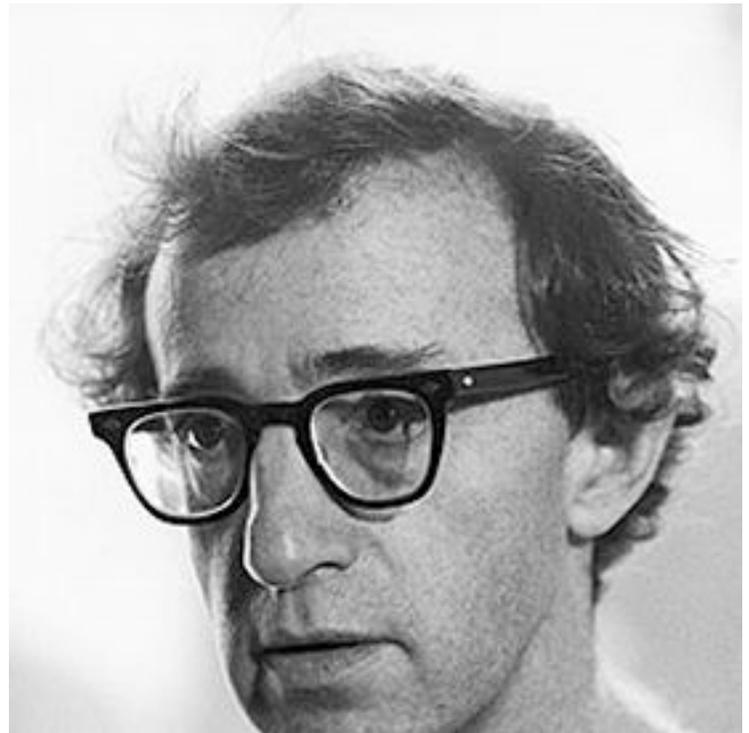
By the early 1970s, Allen’s films were almost automatic commercial successes, if not boxoffice blockbusters, and they were readily distributed by United Artists.

In 1975, Allen published a second book of short fiction, *Without Feathers*, which contained among other metaphysical musings two one-act plays entitled “God” and “Death.” He also

appeared in a film by Martin Ritt (and written by Walter Bernstein with Allen in mind) called *The Front*, about blacklisting in the McCarthy era. Though Allen had vowed in the late 1960s never to act in anyone else’s films, he regarded this one as a worthy cause. The philosophical concerns that Allen had played with in *Without Feathers* and *Love and Death* were to find serious expression in his next feature, *Annie Hall* (1977), considered by many to be a turning point in his artistic development—his final escape from the constraints of commercial comedy.

Annie Hall begins like *Love and Death* with Woody Allen delivering a monologue—this time directly to the camera. He is Alvy Singer, a successful New York Jewish comedian who might almost be Woody Allen. Singer is “trying to figure out where did the screw-up come?” in his relationship with his Wasp former girlfriend Annie Hall. After a summary of Alvy’s Brooklyn childhood and two unhappy marriages, we follow the history of that relationship, “sifting the pieces” in flashback, interspersed with moments of fantasy. Alvy had met Annie when she was a gauche and eccentric newcomer to New York. With his help and encouragement she had developed into a poised and successful nightclub singer. Their affair ended, resumed, and ended again for good when Annie moved to Los Angeles to pursue her career and a new lover (Paul Simon). Alvy writes his first play, basing it on their affair but with a happy ending, and thus, through the ameliorations of art, becomes reconciled to his loss.

Annie Hall is played by Woody Allen’s Wasp former girlfriend and professional protégée Diane Keaton (born Diane Hall), and yet Allen denies that the film is autobiographical, or an accurate record of his relationship with Keaton. Maurice Yacowar suggests that the film “seems more fruitfully located in the myth of Pygmalion than in Allen’s life story. It is the story of an artist who falls in love with his own creation and loses her when she



blossoms into full life. Like the Pygmalion myth, it admits a double sympathy: one can appreciate the artist’s loss, but one can also understand his creation’s need for freedom and independence.”

If that is the film's myth, its theme was explained by Allen in an *Esquire* interview with Frank Rich (May 1977). "The fundamental thing behind *all* motivation and *all* activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death, for even "the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time." Yacovar points out that this is the subject of Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, "the first book Alvy buys Annie and the one he lingers over when they are separating. *Annie Hall* dramatizes Becker's argument that "man's essential activities are a response to his sense of his inevitable death," and that art itself is an attempt "to compensate for the limitations of life."

Annie Hall, like *Sleeper* and several later films, was coscripted by Allen and the future director Marshall Brickman, and photographed by Gordon Willis, thereafter Allen's regular cinematographer. The film was a turning-point in Allen's career, not only in the seriousness of its concerns but in the confident use of the medium and its audacious departures from narrative convention. Alvy speaks directly to the camera/audience in his opening monologue and later invokes the audience's support in an argument with Annie ("You heard that because you were there so I'm not crazy"). In an early exchange between Alvy and Annie, subtitles reveal what they are actually thinking as they exchange exploratory banalities.

There are other more purely visual experiments as well. Double exposure is used to show Annie's "real self" rising from the bed while Alvy is making love to her body. There is an animated sequence in which Alvy imagines Annie as the attractively wicked stepmother of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. A split screen contrasts a deadly-gracious Easter dinner at Annie's family home in Chippewa Falls with a raucous meal *chez* the Singers of Coney Island; the same device later shows us Annie and Alvy with their respective analysts, giving contrary versions of the same circumstances. According to Yacovar, these and "indeed all Allen's liberties with film rhetoric assert the power of art in the struggle against the transience of love and life....*Annie Hall* is a character as charming, as absurd, and as elusive as life itself. She embodies Alvy's denial of death through romantic love, and Allen's through art."

Annie Hall received Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Actress. It was also an immediate box-office success, particularly in sophisticated urban areas where audiences found their own fears and hang-ups for once receiving loving attention on the screen. As Diane Jacobs wrote, "This is our love story as well."

But if *Annie Hall* was a "serious" comedy, it was still a comedy, and "when you do comedy," Allen thought, "you're not sitting at the grown-up table." His first attempt to take his place at this board was *Interiors* (1978), scripted by Allen alone, but with no role for himself....

Drawing on such impeccable antecedents as *King Lear*, Chekov, Eugene O'Neill and, above all, Allen's cinematic idol Ingmar Bergman, *Interiors* is a serious attempt to be serious. It was beautifully shot by Willis in cool grays and cream and pale pastels, and brought Allen an Oscar nomination as Best Director, but had a very mixed reception....Many reviewers thought Allen had taken too much from Bergman. Richard Grenier wrote that he "endangered his project from the beginning by...imposing a Swedish ethos on urban American material."

Manhattan, which followed in 1979, was another collaboration with Marshall Brickman. Allen said that he had here attempted a marriage of the psychological delving of *Interiors* and

the humor of *Annie Hall*. Most were relieved to find him back on his home ground, dealing again with "affluent, articulate, creative neurotics" in Manhattan here lovingly celebrated in black-and-white Panavision by Gordon Willis, and in the lush score by another devoted New Yorker, George Gershwin.

Woody Allen plays Isaac Davis, a television writer in his early forties who is having an affair with Tracy (Mariel Hemingway), a high school student of seventeen. Enchanted as he is, he cannot commit himself to the relationship on account of her youth. Isaac's friends Yale (Michael Murphy) and Mary (Diane Keaton) are also having an affair, although Yale is married. When this relationship collapses, Isaac leaves Tracy and takes up with Mary. Isaac's ex-wife (Meryl Streep) publishes a damning account of their marriage and his manifold neuroses. In the end, Yale leaves his wife to be reunited with Mary, and Isaac decides to commit himself to Tracy. He finds her just about to leave New York for England on a six-month scholarship, and agrees to wait for her....Andrew Sarris called it "the only true great film of the 1970s." Not everyone has shared this view, however, and Peter Biskind maintains that Isaac's desire for Tracy represents "a triumph of the 1970s over the 1950s, of *Playboy* over Freud, the id over the superego....*Manhattan* was the thinking man's *Porky's*."

Allen's producers, Rollins and Joffe, previously distributing through United Artists, switched with *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* to Orion. Allen continued to work with his chosen collaborators and total artistic freedom, as well as sufficient budgets to make films like *Zelig* (1983), a technical tour de force that took three years to complete. Loosely based on the life of a renowned impostor of the 1920s and 1930s, it features Allen as Leonard Zelig, a nondescript little man who takes on the character of anyone he is with, and magically inserts himself into history, appearing in photographs beside such notables as Calvin Coolidge, Jack Dempsey, William Randolph Hearst, and Chaplin....

By combining real newsreel footage and photographs with perfectly matched counterfeits, Allen and Willis created a seamless "fictional documentary," enhanced by "expert appraisals" of Zelig's strange personality and achievements by such mandarins as Susan Sontag, Irving Howe, and Bruno Bettelheim, cheerfully satirizing their own critical procedures. Raising a variety of questions about the validity of newsreels and news photography, and in general about media manipulation of events, the film also



reflects Allen's concern about "a chameleon-like personality, giving up your own personality so you can be part of the crowd—an attitude that, carried to extremes, leads to fascism."

Some see Woody Allen as a clown misguided enough to want to play Hamlet, or possibly Shakespeare. For Pauline Kael, it is as if he “had been blessed with perfect pitch for reaching audiences, and had then become tone-deaf.” On the other hand, many regard him as “the best American filmmaker” (Stanley Kauffmann) and as “America’s most authentic, most serious, most consistent film *auteur*” (Vincent Canby). Perhaps, as Allen said about *Stardust Memories*, it will be easier to judge when he is no longer “in the gossip columns.”

from Schickel on Film. Richard Schickel. Willam Morrow and Co. NY 1989

When *Hannah and Her Sisters* appeared in 1986, Vincent Canby stated very simply something that had needed saying for some time: “There’s nobody else in American film who comes anywhere near him in originality and interest,” To that thought he appended another: “One has to go back to Chaplin and Buster Keaton, people who were totally responsible for their own movies, to find anyone comparable to him.” It is an equally accurate observation, but it does not go quite far enough in its search for comparisons. It seems to me the truly relevant analogies are to be found not in film at all but in literature. Someone like John Updike, who approximates Woody in age, steady productivity, and consistency of quality, comes to mind....

He has actually achieved the most nearly perfect autonomy of anyone making movies in America today. So long as his budget remains under a certain figure (said to be in the ten-million-dollar range), he has to submit no script or outline to Orion pictures in order to go to work, to show nothing he has made to its executives before he wants to, to make no changes they think might be helpful when he does finally present them with his finished work. On the other hand, his schedules and budgets permit him time to reshoot entire sequences if he determines something isn’t working properly once he has assembled his rough cut. This is a form of control over his finished work that no other director I know of has. And again, the model is literary; when he reshoots he is in the position of a writer calmly revising his first draft before sending it off to his publisher, not that of the typical director desperately trying to oblige his second thoughts (and often enough his employers’ whims), yet confined to his editing room, frantically searching his trims and outtakes, looking for a miracle, because no one would think to give him the money to do the job properly by retakes....

There is something else about them [Allen’s characters] that is new in his work. They are all engaged in quite desperate efforts to find sexual fulfillment, and whatever jokes are strewn along their path, there is ultimately nothing funny about those pursuits....They all are people knowingly in pursuit of inappropriate and ultimately self-destructive loves and yet unable to stop themselves. This “victimization by one’s own emotions” is particularly a vice of the urban middle and upper classes, Woody thinks. “I know that passion, I see it all the time—the unfathomableness of desire,” he said to me, the subject having arisen because *Hannah and Her Sisters* so forcefully reverts to this theme. “The smartest men and women are trapped by it. They think they can control situations like this, but they can’t.”

Why this so fascinates him it is impossible to say—even famous people have secret lives, real or imaginary—but Woody quite openly identifies this subject as his major preoccupation, the one he believes he will never escape. “You go to see a Bergman

film, and you know you will be dealing with God’s silence. Whenever you see a Scorsese film, you know there is going to be a sociopath in it. With me, it’s this thing. It’s there over and over again. You can’t help it—you need to deal with it in order to live.” The switch into the objectifying second person is too late; it cannot disguise the passion of his concern with passion’s victims.

from Woody Allen A Life in Film. Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee. Chicago. 2003.

In talking about *Crimes and Misdemeanors* Woody uttered my favorite sentence of our interview: “I just wanted to illustrate, in an entertaining way, that there’s no God....” The remark is unconsciously funny (Woody Allen is almost never consciously funny when he’s discussing his work), one of those things that just slip out when you’re concentrating hard on a subject, not completely minding your p’s and q’s.

On the other hand, it pretty well sums up *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. The fashionable eye surgeon Judah (Martin Landau) has a mistress (Anjelica Huston), who is impatient for him to do as he has long promised—divorce his wife and marry her. But she’s a vulgar sort, not at all the kind of person he could introduce to his chic friends. He would happily pay her off, but that doesn’t interest her. If Judah will not marry her, she will pull down his perfect life and leave him standing in its wreckage.

As she becomes more and more threatening, the thought of disposing of her becomes more and more attractive. Judah has a mobbed-up brother who can arrange the hit, which he accomplishes almost as a routine errand. Judah suffers pangs of guilt. He is nervous about the detective who comes sniffing around. But for the cop it’s a minor case—he has a lot on his plate—and soon Judah’s guilt subsides and he glides smoothly back into the even tenor of his well-appointed life.

Among Judah’s patients is a man of perfect goodness, a rabbi named Ben, played by Sam Waterson, serenely certain that we live in a morally ordered universe. On the other hand, Ben is going blind. Which proves that good deeds—good lives—never go unpunished as surely as Judah’s criminal life proves the opposite.

If this were all there was to *Crimes and Misdemeanors* it would be a very rich film. But there is more, namely Woody’s Cliff, a comically earnest documentary filmmaker, whose brother-in-law, Lester (Alan Alda), is everything he’s not—a shrewd, pompous, egocentric, and wildly successful producer of television sitcoms. As is so often the case with such figures, the world has begun to take him seriously—he has recently guest-lectured on comedy at Harvard, retailing his pretentious theories on what makes us laugh. He hires Cliff to make a PBS documentary about him, a job the latter takes in order to finance his own film about a great philosopher who is also a holocaust survivor.

Cliff is not a particularly good man. Or a particularly bad one. He is our surrogate in the film in that he more or less means well and is doing his best to survive in a world that keeps presenting him with ambiguous moral choices. His wife is contemptuous of his pure intentions—justifiably so, since he takes a shine to Hillary, an equally sober PBS functionary, played by Mia Farrow. In the end he is—next to Dolores—the person most victimized in the film. His philosopher-subject, despite the life-affirming statements we see him making in Cliff’s footage, inexplicably commits suicide. Hillary succumbs to Lester’s wiles, and Cliff himself is fired from Lester’s documentary when he starts intercutting footage of his subject with noxious dictators.

This film—like *Hannah*, is bifurcated—essentially intertwining two major narrative streams that are contradictory in mood. What holds it together is a metaphor: eyes. There is Judah’s profession to begin with and the tragedy that befalls his patient, Ben. Early in the film Dolores makes the standard observation about eyes being the windows of the soul, which Judah ignores. His view of such matters is scientific and materialistic. But when he sees Dolores dead and stares into her sightless eyes, their blankness makes a profound impression on him. We may debate the existence of the soul; we cannot debate the terror we feel at the absence of life, even a life that is not particularly a good one.

But Woody’s metaphor extends well beyond that moment. The impossible Lester must convert every experience into a bad joke. Cliff is his opposite; he cannot tolerate a joke, most especially the cosmic one that robs him of his saintly subject before he has finished his film about him. He has been seeing him intently through his viewfinder, but he has not seen into his despair. So he and his brother-in-law are each only partly sighted. And it is interesting that Ben, who is actually going blind, is already blind to the iniquities of the world. Were he not, one imagines, he could not be quite so comfortably good.

Woody likes the figure of Ben. He has said that he envies him his sustaining faith. He believes he is one of the two characters in the film who “triumph.” (The other is Cliff’s niece, whom he adores, and who is, because of her youth, still an innocent; whether, like Ben, she can sustain that state as she grows older and more experienced is an open question and one Woody does not address.)

But finally this movie is not, most significantly, about guilt and innocence. It may be, as Woody says, about the absence of God in the universe. But that’s just another way of saying that the universe is silent and indifferent to what we do in it. In a world ruled by chance, more than likely you can get away with murder. It is also true, as Woody says, that good intentions actually mean as little as bad intentions as we go through life. All that really counts is success—getting money, rising in class, which in turn will make you famous. Which, naturally, increases your power to do as you please, without fear of condemnation, either to jail or to pariah status.

On balance it could be argued that *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is the most successful of Woody’s more overtly serious films. In part that’s because it is leavened by the *spritzing* that goes on in the Cliff story. More important, though, is the sheer liveliness of the storytelling and the characterizations in both parts of the film. There are no dull incidents and no dull people here—they have in their admittedly misguided passions a heat that is missing, say, from the principal figures of *Interiors* or *September* or *Another Woman*, and this energy disguises the rather schematic nature of the picture’s moral reflections. In short, it “works” better for audiences than some of Woody’s other highly aspiring films. It seems to have caught in their minds better too. People appear to remember it more vividly than they do many of his other works.

from *Conversations with Woody Allen His Films, the Movies, and Moviemaking*. Eric Lax. Alfred A. Knopf. New York 2007.

At the end of Crimes and Misdemeanors, Cliff (Woody Allen), a failed documentary maker, and Judah, the ophthalmologist/murderer (played by Martin Landau), sit on a piano bench at the wedding of the daughter of Ben, the blind rabbi (played by Sam Waterson). The scene provides a chance for Cliff to sum up his (and Woody’s) feelings about the randomness of life.

Woody had hoped for Waterson to do it, but by the time he had rewritten the scene, Waterson was in Russia on another project. Driving home after a screening of the film, Woody feels it works with him doing the lengthy solo speech because of his training as a monologist, and because “I feel my films are such a personal statement that I’m shameless about moralizing in the end. It’s like the old Sid Caesar show joke among the writers. Sid would sum up a sketch and say, ‘If there’s one thing I’ve learned...’ Maybe all the writers were nice Jewish boys brought up to have a little idealistic lesson at the end as a summary.”

EL: This film takes on some pretty big issues. [A successful ophthalmologist (Landau) who is regarded as a pillar of the community takes a mistress (Anjelica Huston) who becomes increasingly demanding that he leave his wife. He promises to but doesn’t and eventually the mistress threatens to expose his financial impropriety with a charity. Desperate to keep his place in society and his family intact, he asks his less successful brother, who has underworld connections, to rid him of the threat. A murder is arranged and at first the doctor is racked with guilt. But in time he realizes he has gotten away with it; he accepts that in what he sees as a godless universe, there will be no consequences and so resumes his comfortable life.]

WA: Something I’ve always been fascinated with and have dealt with in other films of mine is this Tolstoy crisis—he came to the point in his life when he just couldn’t figure out why he shouldn’t commit suicide. Is it worth living in a godless world? The head says no, but the heart is too scared to take action to end it.

EL: There is seldom any swearing or raunchy language in your films. Is that a conscious decision you’ve made?

WA: It’s a fifty-fifty line. There’s a part of me that grew up with an automatic cleanness about my pictures. They’ve always been clean because my influences when I grew up were Chaplin or [George S.] Kaufman and [Moss] Hart, Cole Porter. Listen, even *Another Woman* is a PG picture. We were lucky we didn’t get a G.

EL: But in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* you use the word “asshole.”

WA: The original line was, “Every line of human kindness sticks a shaft up God’s ass,” but [laughs] I couldn’t go through with it. It’s just the brutality of the language.

EL: Len Maxwell [a comic who performed many of the skits Woody created as a young writer] once said of you: “Anybody who says, ‘I wafted gently over to her’ doesn’t need to use ‘fucking.’”

WA: The truth is I would use whatever language was required to get the effect I needed. So far nothing I’ve done has required language other than what I used....

EL: Some of the themes of *Match Point* are in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, in which there is a Woody Allen character. How did the writing of these two scripts differ, having you in one and not the other?

WA: In *Crimes*, nobody had any interest in my aspirations [*those of Cliff, the obscure documentary filmmaker*]; they were only interested in success. My part of the picture was for comic relief. The real story of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is Martin Landau's.

EL: Who gets away with murder.

WA: There were a lot of people who felt that Marty was haunted and he had to keep telling the story like the Ancient Mariner. But that was not it *at all*. He was in no way haunted. He was just fine. He realized that in a godless universe you can get away with it and it doesn't bother him.

EL: How does *Crimes and Misdemeanors* stand in your estimation?

WA: It was okay, but it was a little too mechanical for me. I think I was working too hard, whereas *Match Point* just flowed organically. I just happened to have the right characters in the right place at the right time.

EL: You also were fourteen years ahead in terms of experience. When you were writing *Match Point* were you thinking, I've dealt with this subject somewhere before in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* but I have these other things I want to say?

WA: No, I was saying that I want to obey the story and if you obey the needs of the creation of the piece of fiction, the meaning reveals itself. Years ago Paddy Chayefsky said to me, "When a movie is failing or a play is failing"—he put it so brilliantly—"cut out the wisdom." [*He laughs.*] Marshall Brickman said it a different way—I told you this before—but just as cogently, just as insightful: "The message of the film can't be in the dialogue." And this is a truth that's hard to live by because the temptation is to occasionally take a moment and philosophize and put in your wisdom, put in your meaning....

What I'm really saying—and it's not hidden or esoteric, it's just clear as a bell—is that we have to accept that the universe is godless and life is meaningless, often a terrible and brutal experience with no hope, and that love relationships are very, very hard, and that we still need to find a way to not only cope but lead a decent and moral life.

People jump to the conclusion that what I'm saying is that anything goes, but actually I'm asking the question: given the worst, how do we carry on, or even why should we choose to carry on? Of course we don't choose—the choice is hardwired in us. The blood chooses to live. [*Laughs.*] Please note as I pontificate here, you're interviewing a guy with a deficient denial mechanism. Anyhow, religious people don't want to acknowledge the reality that contradicts their fairy tale. And if it is a godless universe [*he chuckles*], they're out of business. The cash flow stops.

Now, there are plenty of people who choose to lead their lives in a completely self-centered, homicidal way. They feel, Since nothing means anything and I can get away with murder, I'm going to. But one can also make the choice that you're alive and other people are alive and you're in a lifeboat with them and

you've got to try and make it as decent as you can for yourself and everybody. And it would seem to me this is so much more moral and even much more "Christian." If you acknowledge the awful truth of human existence and choose to be a decent human being in the face of it rather than lie to yourself that there's going to be some heavenly reward or a punishment or a payoff somehow and you act well, then you're acting well not out of such noble motives, the same so-called Christian motives. It's like the suicide bombers who allegedly act out of noble religious or national motives when in fact their families get a financial payoff, revel in a heroic

legacy—not to mention the promise of virgins for the perpetrators, although why anyone would want a group of virgins rather than one highly experienced woman is beyond me.



from *The Hidden God. Film and Faith. Mary Leo Bandy and Antonio Monda. Museum of Modern Art NY 2003*

Crimes and Misdemeanors
Antonio Monda

The last lines of

Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* are entrusted to Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann), an intellectual modeled on the writer Primo Levi. We have been following two different stories, which are united only by this final scene. Now, through the voice of the film's most respected character, who has committed suicide earlier in the story, Allen delivers the moral that in the classical Greek dramatic tradition would have been presented with the words "*O mythos deloy oti*" (The fable demonstrates that) "Human happiness doesn't seem to have been included in the design of Creation." This looks like a bleak conclusion to a story that mixes its tragedy with comedy yet Allen tries to find a little space for hope. With the strong accent and laborious English of man forced to move to a new country to escape horrible prosecution, Levy continues, "It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to the indifferent universe. And yet most human beings seem to have the ability to keep trying, and even to find joy from simple things like their family, their work, and from the hope that future generations might understand more."

There's plenty of both family and work in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, but neither of them seem to bring any kind of relief to the film's characters. At every step, Allen's most ambitious movie deals with the fear of the universe's indifference and with the existence or nonexistence of a hidden God, who may or may not be watching us.

In one of the film's two plot lines, the wealthy ophthalmologist Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau) arranges for the murder of his mistress, Dolores (Anjelica Huston), to avoid jeopardizing the comfort of his life. He has learned from his religious father that God "will reward the righteous and punish the wicked," but he doesn't believe in God; he defines himself as "a skeptic who still has some of these feelings stuck with me." And this is Judah's tragedy: he has been unable to distance himself from the religious teachings he absorbed growing up—unlike his brother Jack (Jerry Orbach), who has cut any liaison with morality and lives in the underworld—yet he is not influenced by these

teachings to resist an evil action. He is one of the multitude who have abandoned religion mainly to avoid any moral commitment. The nature of Judah's criminality is suggested by Levy's ethical meditation, "We define ourselves from the choices we make." Not only does he kill, he is able to recover from his remorse. His action demonstrates an oft-quoted statement of Dostoyevsky's, "If God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted."

In the opening scene we see Judah recognized for his "philanthropy" and for being a "good husband and father." We soon learn how false these aspects of his life are, although other things he is known for are true: "He knows the best restaurant in Paris, he knows the best recording" of a particular musician....Judah's moral choices are driven by the desperate attempt to preserve his respectability and these marginal aspects of his life—appearances that the reality makes untrue. He escapes from meditation on his father's teachings ("What are the eyes of God like? Unimaginably penetrating and intense") into an easy joke, of a kind hungered for by Allen's own loving audience ("I am wondering if it is because of this I became an ophthalmologist"). Allen is suggesting that to be part of this world of hypocrisy and appearance is to be part of a moral void in which a criminal act is virtually a natural event.

Dolores, meanwhile, is sincere. In fact, when she sees that her relationship with Judah has no future, she founders, becoming obsessive and even threatening. Allen doesn't justify her actions but he does empathize with her desperation. Judah's response to her, though, is chillingly legalistic ("I promised nothing!"), and his attempt at a solution is vulgar economics: he offers to reimburse his mistress for her missed career opportunities.

The film's second plot line involves Lester (Alan Alda), a successful TV producer; Halley Reed (Mia Farrow), who works in the film business; and Allen's own character, Cliff, a documentary filmmaker who believes in moral values, serious stories, and cinema. Lester's bourgeois values are cousin to Judah's, but Lester is in many ways less likable: driven by ego and ambition, he lives in an empty, self-celebrating world. If Judah is corrupt enough to put his remorse behind him, Lester, in the same situation, wouldn't even show the symptoms of remorse. There is no space for humanity in his scheme of things, or for pain.

Yet it is Lester who seduces Halley, whom Cliff loves. Cliff is shocked, but must face the world's unfairness. Dolores loses her life; Cliff loses his love, his wife, and his job. As often in Allen's cinema, the only mitigations of this unjust and absurd

world (Cliff's sister, single and lonely, confesses to him that a date has defecated on her during a sexual encounter) are offered by dreamy old movies, in which the men all wear tuxedos and no one registers the mediocrity of daily life. Cliff's attempt to find joy in black and white films is destined to fail ("Wouldn't it be great to live like this?" he asks his young niece) but this decent, idealistic character doesn't seem ready for a religious leap. His relationship with God is filtered to us through Louis Levy's words about the "capacity for love": Cliff's love goes unfulfilled, denying him relief from the realization that "human happiness doesn't seem to have been included in the design of Creation." Like characters in the films of Ingmar Bergman, he believes in the absence of God yet uses, or at least accepts, the word "Creation"—a contradiction both hard and absurd. (Significantly, Allen hired Bergman's longtime cinematographer Sven Nyvist for *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.)

Judah's last chance for a relationship with God, meanwhile, lie in his conversation with a rabbi who is going blind and in his memories of the religious teachings he absorbed in his childhood, when he lived, in Isaac Bashevis Singer's words, "at the court of his father." Judah has decided to be part of the world, and to get dirty there. In a moment both defensive and sincere, he announces, "I tried to be out of the world, but it found me." His conclusion can only be: "God is a luxury I cannot afford."

Judah's memories and his difficult conversation with the rabbi make him realize that "without Law all is darkness," but he remains stricken by the absurdity and injustice of existence. The most poignant of his memories bring him back to a family discussion of the horrors of Nazism, to which no one is able to offer an adequate response; his father proposes faith ("I prefer God over truth"), but an aunt is more nihilistic, and it is to his aunt's nihilism that Judah seems to lean. As Levy would say, "We need a great deal of love in order to persuade us to stay in life. The universe is a pretty cold place." Judah refuses love. As for Cliff, he cannot attain it. There is little hope left in this film.

Judah talks about God for a time ("God have mercy on us, Jack," he remarks at one point to his brother and accomplice in murder), but when he muses in anguish about God's presence or absence, his wife tells him, "You're drunk." In the end he finds it easiest to forget what he has done and go back to the life he loves. In a universe that chooses comfort and power over morality, Allen sees a very fragile hope: the eyes of God are watching us, even though His representative on earth is blind.

FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Nov 27 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention/Yadon Ilaheyya** 2002

Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 2000

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BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS SPRING 2008

Jan 15 Mervyn LeRoy GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933 (1933)

Jan 22 Jacques Tourner CAT PEOPLE (1942)

Jan 29 Irving Rapper NOW, VOYAGER (1942)

Feb 5 Billy Wilder ACE IN THE HOLE (1951)

Feb 12 Billy Wilder WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1957)

Feb 19 François Truffaut 400 BLOWS (1959)

Feb 26 Masaki Kobayashi HARA KIRI (1962)

Mar 4 Robert Altman MCCABE & MRS. MILLER (1971)

Mar 18 Hal Ashby BEING THERE (1982)

Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)

Apr 1 Krzysztof Kiesloweki THE DOUBLE LIFE
OF VERONIQUE (1988)

Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)

Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)

Apr 22 Ingmar Bergman THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

