

since the November elections, Rep. John Conyers, the black Democrat from Michigan, has introduced legislation calling for reparations to blacks for the harm done by slavery. Similarly, Jesse Jackson's efforts on behalf of the Statehood for D.C. movement has seen him compare the district's status to slavery. Neither proposal is likely to bridge the nation's racial gap.

Nevertheless, in the coming years a number of black politicians nationwide will seek higher office in races where the support of white voters will be essential to victory. This year alone, an unprecedented number of black candidates, all Democrats, will be running for statewide office in the South, the home of 50 percent of the nation's black voters and 60 percent of its black officeholders. Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young is running for governor of

Georgia, state senator Theodore Mitchell is running for governor of South Carolina, and former Charlotte mayor Harvey Gantt is likely to run for the U.S. Senate in North Carolina. In Mississippi, Rep. Mike Espy is writing a weekly column and broadcasting a weekly television program—both for statewide, not districtwide, distribution.

Although still something of a long shot, Andy Young has a chance to repeat Doug Wilder's feat in 1990. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* poll shows Young leading in the Georgia governor's race. In his early speeches, Young has stressed economic growth (as Wilder did in his '85 bid for lieutenant governor). Says an Atlanta journalist: "Young can do more with white people than Dr. Carver could do with a peanut." Indeed, as mayor of the

state's largest city—a liability in the rest of the state—Young is respected for his ability to work well with business leaders. But other polls—and most Peach State politicians—are highly skeptical about Young's chances.

Young's failure to appeal to a higher percentage of whites is no doubt due in part to the difficulty he's had in making the transition from former aide to Martin Luther King and Jimmy Carter's U.N. ambassador to good ol' boy. Commenting on the Wilder and Dinkins victories, Young sounded straight off the set of "Hee Haw": "I always felt that white folk in Georgia are way ahead of white folk in New York or Virginia." Yet it seems that Andy still hasn't gotten the hang of pragmatism. My office recently received a form letter over Young's signature asking for contributions to "Voter Education

Namibia," a fund that will go to "hinder South Africa's ability to influence" elections in this new African nation. Namibia is not a cause that white folk in Georgia cotton to.

But even if black candidates in 1990 won't relive the experience of black candidates in 1989, they will continue to influence the direction of American politics. Two years ago, a former operative of the Democratic National Committee told me he would trade 20 percent of the black vote to the Republicans to ease his party's burden of being identified as the party of the blacks. The '89 results, and the moderate black campaigns to come, could lessen the Democrats' burden. In the process, the unearned benefit the GOP has enjoyed from white hostility to blacks or to their political agenda is also likely to decrease. □

THE TALKIES



MANHATTAN MELODRAMA, BAYOU BANTER

by Bruce Bawer

Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* begins with a black-tie banquet at which Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), a sixtyish, affluent, distinguished-looking New York ophthalmologist, is being saluted for his fundraising efforts on behalf of a new hospital wing. It's not long before you know you're in Woody Allen territory: when a colleague raises a toast, he hails Judah as a man who can tell you the name of "the best hotel in Moscow, the best restaurant in Paris, the best recording of a particular Mozart symphony." This gauche, unintentionally daffy equation of great art and *la dolce vita* is vintage Allen; Judah—the public Judah, anyway—is plainly Allen's idea of what every man would like to be. And the best thing he has going for him, it would seem, is his long and happy marriage to the lovely Miriam (Claire Bloom).

Yet, as it develops, everything's not coming up roses for the Rosenthals. Unbeknownst to Miriam, Judah's been having an affair for over two years with a dumpy middle-aged stewardess named Dolores Paley (Anjelica Huston). This

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unstable dame is threatening to tattle not only to Miriam but to the hospital authorities (into whose funds, it appears, Judah unwisely dipped a while back when he was having cash-flow problems). Judah's in a quandary: as he explains to his patient Ben (Sam Waterston), a rabbi who's gradually losing his eyesight, Miriam would never forgive him for having an affair. What to do? To his horror, he's tempted to call his lowlife brother Jack (Jerry Orbach)—who knows how to arrange a rub-out and has no qualms about doing so.

Meanwhile, another marriage—between Ben's aloof, cranky sister Wendy (Joanna Gleason) and her filmmaker husband Clifford (Woody Allen)—is also on the ropes. Clifford's a specialist in pious, low-budget documentaries on acid rain and toxic waste, and Wendy can't help comparing his pathetic career highlights (e.g., honorable mention in a Cincinnati documentary film festival) with the glorious achievements of her brother Lester (Alan Alda), a rich sitcom producer with "a closet full of Emmys." In what seems a last-ditch attempt to turn Clifford around, Wendy arranges for him to do a profile of Lester for a public-TV series; yet Clif-

ford's more interested in getting the series' associate producer, Halley Reed (Mia Farrow), with whom he finds himself becoming infatuated, to back his work-in-progress on the elderly philosopher Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann). Thus we have two protagonists, *Doppelgängern* of sorts, each of them a Jewish man lured by the attractions of a gentile woman into a solemn moral predicament. The questions before us: Will Judah order a hit on Dolores? Will Clifford desert Wendy in short order and hit on Halley?

Plainly, love and death remain Allen's major themes. (Indeed, the title *Crimes and Misdemeanors* might be seen as something of a variation on the title *Love and Death*, with the emphasis this time being not on emotional abstraction but on morally meaningful action: the misdemeanor being adultery, the crime murder.) This is not the first time, moreover, that Allen has placed tenuously connected plots alongside each other: *Hannah and Her Sisters* is the most notable previous example. But the stories in that film fit together in a way that the stories of Judah and Clifford don't. Their connection feels entirely theoretical; they may reflect Allen's enchantment with

a single set of ideas, but they don't strike one as authentic components of a single vision.

And *ideas* is the operative word here. While waiting to find out what Judah and Clifford will do, we listen in on lots of Philosophy 101 chitchat. Judah, we learn, finds the world "harsh and empty of values and pitiless"; Ben counters that it manifests a "moral structure and higher power." Clifford and Halley exchange similarly weighty remarks. This sort of stilted, ponderous give-and-take has made for awkward moments in Allen's movies ever since *Annie Hall*, but he usually gets through them fast enough to avoid major damage. *Interiors* and *September* were exceptions; so, alas, is *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Contributing to the devastation is Allen's most fully orchestrated attempt yet at symbolism, wherein everybody in the picture makes constant references to eyes, blindness, vision, and the like, all of which are meant to allude to a frequently quoted remark by Judah's late father, a rabbi (seen in flashback), to the effect that "the eyes of God are on us always." This pattern of symbolic references is grotesquely overdone and thoroughly mechanical, a textbook example of symbolism-by-the-textbook.

But then virtually all of Allen's post *Love and Death* movies have been blemished, to some degree, by his intellectual and artistic pretensions. If the strongest of them were nonetheless redeemed by their engaging stories, their sympathetic (or, at least, credible) characters, and (above all) their humor, such is not the case here. Throughout *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, one feels strangely distant from the characters, many of whom conform too tidily to Allen prototypes. Lester, for example, is a vapid retread of the Tony Roberts character in *Annie Hall*; Levy (whose big surprise later in the picture is no surprise at all if you've seen *La Dolce Vita*) recalls the aging artist played by Max Von Sydow in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. (Levy is, incidentally, the only character in any of Allen's films whose spoutings on love, death, God, and the meaning of life rise consistently above the sophomoric; it's dismaying, then, to discover that Bergmann—who is, in real life, a Manhattan psychiatrist—improvised most of his own stuff.) Woody Allen is, as ever, Woody Allen, but here, more than usually, he counts on our previous acquaintance with and presumed affection for him to give his character dimension and empathy.

Nor are the situations particularly fresh. As a friend of mine commented, "I wish I had a nickel for every scene in a Woody Allen movie where he proposes marriage to somebody in Central Park." Certainly some of Allen's pet ideas and motifs have worn dangerously thin: the notion of a grown-up protagonist peeking in on an agonizing dinner-table scene of his childhood; the stiff, devout name-dropping of bygone artists, composers, and poets (and of that supreme temple of learning, Columbia University); the celebration of innocence, in the form of children; the celebration of movies as both reality's mirror and its escape hatch; and the celebration of artistry—as invariably personified by Woody Allen—over commercial claptrap. Many of the film's subsidiary characters, moreover, tend to be contrived (Ben with his emblematic blindness; Judah's father with his handy aphorisms), and many of the motivations dubious. (Would Judah really have gotten entangled with a dreary haridan like Dolores? And would his fear of Miriam's wrath really cause him to contemplate murder?)

What damages the film more than anything, however, is its posture toward Judah's and Clifford's respective transgressions. Murder is in the air here, but the ultimate sin in Allen's world is plainly not homicide but fornication. Whereas Judah's debates over whether to have Dolores slaughtered are relatively brief, mannerly, and low-key (coming off as little more than *pro for-*

ma), Clifford's hysterical carryings-on about Halley seem interminable. Truth to tell, Allen is far more captivated by the misdemeanor of sexual dalliance than by the high crime of murder. Underneath all the gags, his is a harsh Old Testament world in which the Jewish husband is sinner and the infidel woman the occasion of sin; Judah and Clifford lust after shiksas in the same way they lust after (respectively) high and pop Western culture. (It seems no coincidence that Judah's favorite composer is Schubert—an Austrian!—and that Clifford is seen viewing a movie with the definitive Wasp title of *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*.) But Allen's apparent newfound esteem for Jehovah feels slick, insincere; though his message is presumably that, in order to behave decently, we must believe God's eyes are on us, he doesn't convince us for a minute that it's a lack of religious conviction that makes possible Judah and Clifford's ethical waverings. (He doesn't even convince us that this is what *he* believes.) *Crimes and Misdemeanors* pays homage to the Almighty, in short, in the same superficial way that earlier Allen films have paid homage to Bergman and Fellini.

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Robert Harling's play *Steel Magnolias*, which can currently be seen at the Lucille Lortel Theater in New York, is a two-act, four-scene, six-character hen session set in a Chinquapin, Louisiana, beauty parlor. The men are all offstage, and a miserable lot they are: Truvy, the bighearted, self-styled "glamour technician," has a spouse who lies around all day and sponges off her; Annelle, her bashful assistant, has just been deserted by a husband who's wanted on drug charges; Ouiser, a wealthy, cantankerous regular patron, has been so embittered by two lousy marriages that she shows affection only



to her mangy dog; M'Lynn, another regular, is married to a goofball who spends every spare moment shooting at birds and beasts; and as the play opens, M'Lynn's daughter, Shelby, is about to wed a selfish young lawyer.

The point is clear: men are thoughtless, childish, irresponsible—and they're not even the one thing they're supposed to be, *strong*. When M'Lynn's family suffers a crisis, her mate folds up helplessly, and to her surprise she's the one who hangs tough. They're *all* tough, these delicate flowers of Dixie (thus, of course, the title). And they're funny, too: the catty crosstalk is consistently entertaining. The only problem, aside from the creaky exposition and uneven acting, is that the characters often remind one less of Southern belles than of the boys in Mort Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*: Harling's humor, in other words, can be extremely campy, and one comes across locutions, references, and touches of sensibility here that seem to have less to do with small-town Louisiana womanhood than with the milieu of the thoroughfare—namely, Christopher Street in Greenwich Village—on which the Lucille Lortel Theater is situated. If Tennessee Williams had written *The Women*, it might've come out something like this.

Directed by Herbert Ross from a script by Harling, the movie version of *Steel Magnolias* stays close to the text of the play (though some of the more caustic lines about men and religion have been omitted) while opening up the action quite effectively. The cast is a mixed bag: Dolly Parton is splendidly right for Truvy, whose motto is "There's no such thing as natural beauty," and Olympia Dukakis does a perfect job as Clairee, the rich, gracious, quip-happy widow of the town's longtime mayor. But the neat little part of Annelle is wasted on Daryl Hannah (Flannery O'Connor would've understood this role, but Daryl doesn't), and Julia (Mystic Pizza) Roberts barely makes an impression as Shelby.

The big disappointment is Sally Field, who fails to have a single natural moment as M'Lynn, her accent wandering all over the place (but then, so did those in *Gone With the Wind*: bad Southern accents are a proud tradition of Hollywood movies) and her Big Scene toward the end of the movie coming across as little more than a bid for a third Oscar. (You keep expecting her to look into the camera and wail: "Do you still like me?") The sad part is that it's a good, solid role; one would've liked to see Tess Harper, Christine Lahti, or Jessica Lange take a stab at it. As for Shirley MacLaine, she's dreadfully miscast as Ouiser, and

her presence makes one realize how similar this story is to her schlocky *Terms of Endearment*, the main difference being that the eccentric, misanthropic, fanatically possessive mother of that movie splits in two here, into the eccentric, misanthropic Ouiser and the fanatically possessive mother M'Lynn.

One wonders why the producers of *Steel Magnolias* bothered to drag this predominantly Yankee cast down bayou way: though it was shot in the author's hometown of Natchitoches, the film only intermittently captures the flavor of the Deep South. For instance, though Harling has fleshed out the *dramatis personae* with a few males (including Tom Skerritt as M'Lynn's husband), the only black person I remember seeing in the whole picture was an affluent-looking guest at Shelby's wedding. Not since Mayberry, on the old "Andy Griffith Show," has anyone committed to celluloid a more thoroughly caucasian Southern burg. (I'm not quota-mongering, you understand; I'm just saying this odd deficiency robs the movie of realism.) It would've helped, too, if instead of opting for the usual big-budget glossy-realistic cinematography, the filmmakers had gone for photography that was just a bit more stylized (or, at least, nearer to the look of *sex, lies, and videotape*, which captured Louisiana nicely without hitting you over the head with atmosphere). And rather than commission the syrupy standard Movie Music that has been provided by Georges Delerue (*Jules et Jim*, *Julia*, *A Little Romance*), they might've done better to slap together a score out of the sort of country-and-western tunes that Harling's play uses as a bridge.

But the film is in many respects an improvement over the two-acter. By adding a few scenes that take place in a hospital, and by transferring much of the beauty-parlor action to M'Lynn's house (and, in the climactic sequence, to a cemetery), Harling lends credibility to the catastrophe at the center of his story, making it—as well as the beauty parlor—seem less of a structural artifice than it does in the play. A number of other big new sequences, furthermore—among them Shelby's wedding, a Christmas festival, and a riverside Easter get-together—are fitting and funny, even if the sight gags (e.g., a wedding cake with gray frosting in the shape of an armadillo) do fall a tad too often into the category of Southern tawdry-grotesque, Beth Henley division. On the whole, indeed, notwithstanding all its imperfections, *Steel Magnolias* is well worth seeing; quite simply, it's a top-notch amusement—a genuinely diverting movie at a time when funny film comedy can seem as rare as magnolias in January. □

BOOK REVIEWS

Writer? "A reader moved to emulation."
—Saul Bellow

Jorge Luis Borges dreamed of a Universal Library from which every thinkable book could be shown to have been plagiarized; it would simply contain, printed and bound, all possible sequencings of characters, not forgetting some hundreds of pages of just "z." Though his Library of Babel is a good deal too big for practicable production, one might still argue that the English language contains, potentially, all that can be said in English, including the sentence you are reading now. Still, did any written language, pre-1922, contain "Mkgnao," James Joyce's transcription of what a hungry cat said? (She also said "Mrkgnao" and even "Mrkrngnao," though the closest her owner could come was "Miaow." Cats are fluent in Cat; humans aren't.)

Cats aside, though, what can be said about plagiarism? We've all read books very like books we've read before. That's especially true if we keep up with political commentary. Yet do Tom Wicker's columns plagiarize Ellen Goodman's? Not at all, though they do write from a common center and could spell one another during sick leaves. We'd have plagiarism should Tom on a lazy afternoon turn to something of Ellen's for sentence structure and sequence, changing a few words now and then to keep things Wickerized. (And how much would he need to change before we'd swung beyond the orbit of proof?)

I'm teasing you with the unthinkable just to suggest how slippery Thomas Mallon's subject is. Generalizations on plagiarism he's found "more perilously porous than those of most others." The best Sam Johnson's great *Dictionary* of 1755 could manage was "Theft; literary adoption of the thoughts or works of another." Thinking "works" might be a misprint for "words," I checked Mallon's quotation back to the source. No, "works" is correct. Johnson was shrewd in seeing how words, even sequences of words, may be Public Domain.

That was especially true in the eighteenth century, when writers were vying

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STOP, THIEVES!

STOLEN WORDS: FORAYS INTO THE ORIGINS AND RAVAGES OF PLAGIARISM Thomas Mallon/Ticknor & Fields/300 pp. \$18.95

Hugh Kenner

to shape a common idiom. Earlier, Shakespeare had aimed differently:

No, this my hand may rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green, one red. . . .

And, unforgettably idiosyncratic, that glowing "incarnadine" is surely stamped as *his* word? Well, Longfellow did venture to use it in 1845, and in 1872 it even turns up in somebody's *History of Columbus, Ohio*. But when epigones borrow it we still sense Shakespeare's weight. Plagiarism? Better, quasi-allusion.

The eighteenth century, however, eschewed gorgeous words like that, words that might carry some individual's stamp. "I find this word but once," wrote Johnson of "incarnadine," proceeding (as was his duty) to cite Shakespeare, with whose canon he sometimes felt stuck. For from Dryden's time through Johnson's what they were aiming at was an idiom of interchangeable

parts, shaped toward maximum general effectiveness. A modern instance: Did the B-707 plagiarize the DC-8? Most of us can't tell them apart save by noting that the latter sports fewer windows more widely spaced. Both were shaped to get 100-plus passengers economically airborne on four jet engines. By necessity, the two designs converged. Likewise, translations of Homer into rhymed couplets were meant to get any English dabbler airborne, and when someone arrived at an especially neat phrasing it got taken up by his successors with no talk of plagiarism.

Moreover, Pope's *Odyssey* was only partly by Pope; so common was the idiom, the great poet felt secure in subcontracting it. (Imagine Eliot subcontracting chunks of *Murder in the Cathedral*!) And, in that age of censorship, Who had Written the Anonymous What was the buzzing coffee-house topic. (Johnson even doubted if Swift had written *A Tale of a Tub*.)



All of which I go into because I fear Mr. Mallon scamps it. The eighteenth century, he'll have us know, was the age that discovered Literary Property. As it did. For it was the century when capitalism's printers were coming into dominance (and from them stemmed the concept of verbal "property"). But it was also the century that sought to regularize not only spelling but idiom (and, yes, how print does regularize). That meant, not only could you no longer spell your name five different ways, you could not, either, write "the multitudinous seas incarnadine." You might write, oh, "With crimson lustre tint the pallid flood." (And, Eureka!—a rhyme for "blood!")

Anybody at all might feel free to use "crimson lustre," anybody else "pallid flood." Let those phrases not be joined by "tint" and there'd be no problem. Or let "tint" join them, and lo—perhaps—your line! Canonized!

But alas, there's Sterne, lifting paragraphs from Robert Burton; alas, too, there's Coleridge a generation later, lifting from Schelling and Schlegel. Sterne—it's an outside chance—might have assumed his lifts would be spotted and dubbed witty allusions. Coleridge, though—well, Coleridge. What knowledge, what commonality, can a writer assume? Also, at what moment in time?

T. S. Eliot once said he'd appended the Notes to *The Waste Land* to spike the guns of such critics as had earlier accused him of plagiarism. And there's heavy irony when Eliot diligently refers "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne" to *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.i.190, while omitting to ascribe "Those are pearls that were his eyes" to anyone (for, come on, readers must know *something*, if only a tag from *The Tempest*). It's even funnier when Eliot refers "A noise of horns and motors" to "A noise of horns and hunting," from Day's *Parliament of Bees*, which he can feel sure not one reader in a thousand has heard of, even though Day does afford glimpses of a lady's "naked skin." And it's a weakness in the web Thomas Mallon weaves that he never mentions *The Waste Land*.

Mallon is at his strongest with a clear-cut academic case, about a man named Jayme ("Jay") Aaron Sokolow, now forty-four, who concurred with an outside reviewer's judgment that what Texas Tech (Lubbock)'s His-