



## SCREEN

### Critic's Choice

by Sam Karnick

*Hannah and Her Sisters*, written and directed by Woody Allen; Orion Pictures.

Like any civilized society, America reveres its artists. Unfortunately, in this as in most other things, we tend to go overboard. Consequently, we are all too often subjected to the spectacle of a ludicrous buffoon like Gore Vidal on national television pontificating on public policy questions, or a Norman Mailer—a man who once stabbed one of his six wives—being taken seriously by the New York Parole Board, with horrifying consequences.

The worst aspect of this unquestioning reverence, however, is the deleterious effect it has on the artists themselves. The road from storyteller to sage is a perilous one indeed.

So it has been for Woody Allen. His first two films, *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1967) and *Take the Money and Run* (1969), were fitfully amusing trifles. Over the next few years, he began to learn his craft as a filmmaker, and his movies got better, although they still suffered from the superficiality, emphasis on gags over character development, and tendency to repeat endless variations on the same joke evident in his 1960's output.

Then, in 1977, came Allen's breakthrough film, both commercially and artistically: *Annie Hall*. There was no longer any room for disagreement. Woody Allen was an artist, and one of great significance at that. Further forays into this same territory, such as *Interiors* (1978) and *Manhattan* (1979), produced similarly glowing praise.

Now it's clear, of course, that the reason the critics were praising Allen

for his acerbic insights into American life was not that he was writing about ordinary Americans, but that he was writing about *them*: the self-proclaimed American intelligentsia. They couldn't care less about the lives of ordinary Americans, but, oh, did they love to hear jokes about McLuhan, Freud, and Kierkegaard.

And yet, even during these last 10 years, when Allen has enjoyed almost universal respect, there have been disturbing notes, which even his most ardent admirers have felt forced to acknowledge, however obsequiously and reverently.

There was, first of all, the appalling dourness of *Interiors*. The film was clearly a pale imitation of Bergman, which most critics duly pointed out, simply changing the word "pale" to "brilliant." If they had trouble with *Interiors*, however, they should really have been scared, for worse was yet to come, at least from their perspective. In *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Zelig* (1983), Allen attacked the very fame-mongers who had been so kind to him. Like suburban parents whose child has come home a member of a motorcycle gang, they asked, "Where, oh where, did we go wrong?"

Where they had gone wrong, of course, was in imputing too much affection to Allen's earlier satire of themselves. He had never liked them as much as they had thought, and when he made it clear, the criticism stung. Most, however, failed to realize this and stuck by him, hoping he'd come back around.

Well, he has, after a fashion, and all has been forgiven. Last year's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* was just the sort of muddled nonsense the American intelligentsia adores, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*, while better, is unfortunately more of the same. While *Purple Rose* was lugubrious throughout, *Hannah* is a return to the comic form. Unfortunately, Allen seems determined in this film not to be too funny,

lest he not be taken seriously by the critics. So when a scene threatens to become too pleasurable—as when Mickey, his hypochondriacal TV producer, finds out he may really be dying of a brain tumor—Allen cuts the ensuing scene short and quickly races off to another story.

Allen tries to do too many things in *Hannah*, and the film cracks under the strain. Certainly the most entertaining, humorous, and insightful aspect of the film is the story of Mickey's realization that he will someday die, and his comic/pathetic attempts to find faith. This plot parallels something that has been going on in Allen's own life—as is clear both from his films and interviews—but since he apparently hasn't solved the problem for himself, he is at a loss as to how to solve it for his character. So he relegates Mickey to secondary status in the film's narrative scheme, which is a shame. We've seen Allen's search for belief coming out in his films more and more clearly recently, and he is to be commended for this. In *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* there is a serious concern with spiritualism, and the ending hopefully posits the existence of an afterlife. *Broadway Danny Rose* and *Hannah* set major scenes at Thanksgiving celebrations, and in *Stardust Memories* a group of extraterrestrials reproaches Sandy, Allen's alter ego in the film, for "asking the wrong questions" and being too pessimistic. If Allen's over-reaching in his aesthetic forms is unwelcome, certainly his outreach on the spiritual side is a hopeful trend. Unfortunately, he has a few other problems to solve on the way.

Woody Allen's real problem is simply that he is not a very efficient storyteller. Yet he must be praised for recognizing this fact and working, throughout his career, to minimize its effects. Thus the use of voice-overs, fantasy sequences, asides to the audience, printed titles, allusions to other

films and works of literature, and borrowings from other people's plots all add to his ability to get his points across while minimizing his deficiencies as a storyteller. And, as it turns out, most critics have praised him for the bandages without noticing the wounds.

This formal eclecticism, however, is a disadvantage to him as a filmmaker in two important ways. First, the devices don't always work: in *Annie Hall* the voice-overs add insight to the characters while moving the story along, while in *Hannah* they are merely used

to impart information which the author is unable or unwilling to fit into the dramatic context. Second, the devices serve as a crutch and distract him from what he does best. If Woody Allen has one tremendous talent, it's his ability to create memorable, enlightening characters: Alvy Singer, Annie Hall, Leonard Zelig, Danny Rose, Lou Canova, Mickey—any aspiring comic artist would kill to be able to create such a gallery of characters. But Allen feels pressed to “grow,” so he creates self-conscious homages to Bergman, Fellini, Shakespeare, etc.

The more ambitious he becomes, the more his films suffer.

When Woody Allen has trusted his characters to lead us wherever they want to go, as in *Annie Hall*, *Stardust Memories*, and *Broadway Danny Rose*, he has created some of the finest films of the post-Hollywood period. One can only hope he tunes out the critics and tunes in again to his own characters.

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## STAGE

### The House That John Built

by David Kaufman

In the 1980 film *Atlantic City*, Burt Lancaster, portraying a has-been racketeer, turns to a young companion while they're walking along the Boardwalk and exclaims, “You should have seen the Atlantic Ocean in the old days.” According to Louis Malle, the film's director, the producers wanted to cut that line: “They said it didn't make any sense, the ocean hadn't changed. Mais oui! But that was pure John—the way the Lancaster character lived in the past.” (Actually, it's pure Oscar Wilde who describes an old Confederate's response to a full moon: “You should have seen it before the war.”)

The “John” here is John Guare, whose screenplay for *Atlantic City* has been, according to received opinion, eclipsed not by any subsequent work but by his 1971 opus, *The House of Blue Leaves*, currently revived in New York. Although the new production has been welcomed as a play for all seasons, the implicit message to the rave reviews is that they don't write plays like they did in the good old days—15 years ago—when not only the ocean, but also our theater, was still something to behold. With its references to the war in Vietnam, its extended subplot involving an assassination plan, and its zany characters



Swoosie Kurtz in a scene from John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center.

who seem distinctly “60's,” *The House of Blue Leaves* already strikes us as an artifact.

Even the circumstances which Guare recalled some years ago to describe the writing of the script seem to refer to another epoch, one which put its trust in arcane, Eastern mythologies: “I was writing this play and I was completely lost. . . . All these characters kept growing up around me, and I didn't know where I was going. So in desperation I threw the I Ching and asked it what the play was about. ‘The

family is the microcosm,’ it said. Everything came into focus, I finished the play, and then someone told me I'd made a mistake, I'd thrown the I Ching sideways or upside down—I'd gotten the wrong hexagram! . . . But wrong turned out right for me.”

“Right” in this case produced one Artie Shaughnessy, a Central Park zoo-keeper and mediocre singer who has dreams of making it big as a songwriter in Hollywood. Artie resides in the Sunnyside section of Queens (a familiar habitat for Guare) with his wife, Bananas. Bananas went what her nickname designates: “A year ago—two years ago today—two days ago today? Today.” In a monologue, she recalls that fateful day when at the intersection of 42nd Street and Broadway she impersonated a gypsy cabdriver and gave Cardinal Spellman, Jackie Kennedy, Bob Hope, and President Johnson a lift. But their “suitcases spill open and Jackie Kennedy's wigs blow down Forty-Second Street and Cardinal Spellman hits me and Johnson screams and I hit him. I hit them all. And then . . . [the car] blew four flat tires and sinks and I run to protect the car. . . . And cars are honking at me to move. I push the car over the bridge back to Queens. You're asleep. I turn on Johnny Carson to get my mind off and there's Cardinal Spellman and Bob Hope whose nose is still bleeding and they tell the story of what happened to them and everybody laughs. Thirty million people watch Johnny Carson and they all laugh. At me. At me. I'm nobody. I knew all those people better than me. . . . I know everything about them. Why can't