

Love Amid the Ruins

EVENTS OF THE LAST several months have changed forever the way we must look at Woody Allen's films. Before tabloid journalists went into a feeding frenzy about his private life, his admitted romantic involvement with the oldest adopted daughter of his long-time companion Mia Farrow and her allegations of sexual abuse involving her other children, one could understand his films as psycho-documentary.

Now a more psychoanalytic reading of the films seems more appropriate and more rewarding. Allen, the clown character, has been observing, not other people, but the varied dark sides of his own very complex personality. His fictional characters desperately search for love in a tough world, imaged by the concrete canyons of Manhattan. In their quest, they become in turn pathetic and destructive of others as well as themselves. The genius of the artist is that the portrayal of moral ambiguity, sin and redemption in his own life, reflected in many of the less sympathetic figures in his films, says a lot about personal sin as it touches all of us.

Husbands and Wives, Woody Allen's brilliant new film, echoes with spooky references to the summer headlines. The autobiographical elements, though striking in the present context of sensational revelations and allegations, are no more revealing of the author than many of his earlier films. Allen once again segments his own personality, dividing the burden among several of his key characters and examining each one in turn. Gabe Roth (Woody Allen), a modestly prosperous novelist and professor of creative writing at Columbia, finds himself attracted to Rain (Juliette Lewis), a talented 20-year-old student in one of his classes. Her parents named her after the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, but Allen buffs recall Allen's use of the e.e. cummings line "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" as an expression of the romantic ideal in "Hannah and Her Sisters" (1986). His infatuation goes no further than an adult kiss at her 21st-birthday party.

As usual, the Allen protagonist searches for an ideal love, which, given the human condition, is simply unattainable. Gabe's wife Judy (Mia Farrow) needs to be needed and wants another child, but Gabe refuses, concerned with his work and the terrible state of the world. Their apparently happy

marriage, long little more than a truce, inevitably slides into open hostility. The romance of unfilled promise leading to lowered expectations is the most universal theme in Allen's films. Happiness comes only from appreciation of the commonplace, like a walk in Central Park after a snowfall. When these simple joys become dusty memories, then the marriage is over.

The opening scene of "Husbands and Wives" offers fair warning that this film will be different and disturbing. In an unbearably long take, cinematographer Carlo DiPalma moves his restless camera from face to face in a cramped apartment as Sally (Judy Davis) and Jack (Sydney Pollack) explain to Gabe and Judy that they have decided to separate. The nervous movement of the camera makes us seasick watching this painful scene. This documentary quality, maintained throughout the film, creates the intimacy of home movies. At times the action stops, and the characters face the camera for a few moments of a television-style interview with an off-camera voice that approaches the self-revelation of a therapy session.

As Sally and Jack follow out their decision to separate, they reveal themselves as unpleasant facets of Allen's own personality. In the manner of all English teachers, Gabe is ever critical of people and their ideas. Like Allen, the meticulous director, Gabe pushes his charges to ever higher levels of performance. For this reason Judy cannot show her husband her poetry. Judy Davis brilliantly creates in Sally a nasty caricature of Allen's and Gabe's perfectionism. Chain-smoking and foul-mouthed, she rarely finds a positive word or thought about anything. Who could live with such a person? Certainly not her husband Jack, whose pathetic search for love leads him into a series of inept, transparent and ultimately unsatisfying adulteries. He may believe his adolescent behavior is a cry for help, but Sally hears it as a call to arms, preferably nuclear.

Sally and Jack experiment with different partners during their separation. Sally's outspoken and negative wit, once taken as a sign of delightful independent-mindedness, soon erodes her relationship with Michael (Liam Neeson), a charming editor she met through the aggressive matchmaking of Judy, who has her own unrecog-

nized attraction for him. Freed from Sally's carping criticism and New York Times sophistication, Jack finds great delight in the company of Sam (Lysette Anthony), a simple young aerobics instructor. Soon, however, her mindless preoccupation with health foods and horoscopes drives him to the edge of violence. Perhaps Sally and Jack are not so bad for each other after all.

In an early bit of dialogue, Gabe accuses God of playing hide-and-seek with him, and without some awareness of a personal God and some criteria for morality, these affluent, talented Manhattanites stumble from one unsatisfying relationship to the next. What are they looking for? Allen offers little logical explanation for his characters' decisions. They plan no malice and sincerely want to hurt no one, but things happen to them. In affairs of the heart there is no logic, Allen maintains. As love works out its own cruel devices, the innocent become victims, and victims become assassins. In the end, the relationships sort themselves out, and only Gabe is left alone, with no companionship other than his work, another novel that he struggles to complete. Looking into the camera, he asks, "Is this over? Can I go now?"

IS "Husbands and Wives" autobiography? Or apologia? Some of the screen portrayals certainly hit very close to the news stories. The Mia Farrow character, in earlier films presented as a personification of gentleness and compassion, emerges as grasping, confused and emotionally unstable in Judy. Rain's parents encourage her friendship with her professor, and at one point in their relationship they take in a Knicks game at Madison Square Garden.

Hunting for parallels between life and the film can be fun, but it can also be a distraction from a superbly crafted, imaginative and innovative film. Any artist, even one of great imagination like Woody Allen, has to base art to some extent on experience. As the most personal of American film-makers, Allen should not surprise us by his use of autobiographical images and situations. If, however, his relationship with Mia Farrow had remained stable and this were "just another" Woody Allen movie, "Husbands and Wives" would still be a splendid piece of art and a priceless comment on life and love in urban America at the end of this very tired, shopworn century.

RICHARD A. BLAKE

