

# Mixed Doubles

**M**Y PRESENCE at a midday meeting a few weeks ago was not essential. Surely, other demands on my time were more pressing, but for some strange reason as the campus carillon struck noon, even though I'd be a few minutes late, for some inexplicable reason, I decided to put in an appearance. I opened the back door of the building and noticed that the sun had finally reappeared after a fairly robust December snowstorm. Before I had taken 10 steps, a wedge of snow and slush piled on the roof gave way and dropped five stories, hitting me with the precision of a smart bomb. It knocked off my glasses and hat and filled my coat with snow. I staggered for a few steps to regain my balance, but I did not go down. A student rushed over to help. The brick walkway on either side of me was perfectly clean. Had I been five seconds earlier or later, it would have missed me altogether. Had it been a late afternoon meeting, when the snow might have melted and refrozen, the falling ice could have caused serious injury. Think of the amazing coincidences that led to my being at that precise place at that exact time. Yet on balance, I was pretty lucky. I could have been killed.

**Match Point** is Woody Allen's philosophic reflection on such questions of coincidence and luck. Unlike most of us, who note the irony of life's many odd twists and then move on, Allen finds that random events reveal a terrifying chaos in the universe. Even though a large segment of the filmgoing public has refused to revise its initial perception of him as "just another New York Jewish comedian," Allen himself has over the last 30

years chewed over the question of order in the universe with the persistence of Dostoevsky. A physicist in "September" (1987), one of his gloomiest films, answers an inquiry about his work by explaining that no, he does not work on nuclear bombs, but something far more terrible: the realization that the universe is a realm of unspeakable random violence, without sense, without purpose, coming from nothing and returning to nothing, inexorably.

If the universe as a whole has no meaning, then logically neither does the human person. In a comic touch in "Annie Hall" (1977) Allen links the two ideas through a 10-year-old (an Allen surrogate) who refuses to do his homework because he read the universe is expanding and headed to oblivion. Why bother? Neither his parents nor the rabbi can change his mind. The ethical implications are ghastly. Human actions have no value and thus cannot be classified as good or bad. Therefore, no one may judge the moral responsibility of another on the basis of any kind of universal ethical principles. Each individual "creates his own moral universe" and learns to function within it with impunity. Some commit terrible crimes and prosper, while the just suffer unspeakable tragedy. This is just the way the world functions, and since an individual can do nothing to change it, one simply accepts it and goes on living according to personal needs and desires, regardless of others. In "Crimes and Misdemeanors" (1989) the ophthalmologist who murdered his mistress and then flourishes in his life of wealth, privilege and respectability explains that the true horror is not his crime but the realization that it makes no difference whether or not he is punished for his crime. No one cares.

After crossing a long plateau in his career, Allen has come back to the ques-

tions that animated his most productive period. By moving the setting to London and its suburbs and by using a British cast and crew, he has given himself enough distance to create the illusion of objectivity. But this is still quintessential Woody Allen. Despite the locale, several of the characters bear the stamp of the Woody Allen autobiography.

Allen's most familiar films are set in his sanitized version of Manhattan, populated with smart, artistic, sophisticated people who constitute the idealized world that this middle-class, relatively uneducated boy from Brooklyn once strove to enter. These self-centered writers and actors have freed themselves from the social constraints of family and religious principles, but they find themselves imprisoned in their own neuroses. Rarely do they form lasting relationships, nor can they take satisfaction in their obvious achievements. Allen tempers his admiration for such people with envy by assuring himself they are thoroughly miserable in their success, and none are more miserable than the talented but neurotic characters that he portrays himself.

London enables him to sharpen his social criticism even more. Here he deals with old money and traditions, the supremely wealthy who have country estates, shoot grouse, engage in international trade, associate with the titled and enjoy life's finer treasures, like vintage opera records. Remi Adefarasin's cinematography and Jim Clay's set design create a world of rich reds and golds, of old leather in the library and mossy stone in the formal gardens. Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), a former tennis pro from a modest background in Ireland, has lost his competitive edge and accepts a job as a tennis instructor in a very exclusive country club outside London. Like Allen, Chris finds that his talent enables him to cross the waters (the Irish Sea differs little from the East River) and crash a world far above his origins, but, like Allen, he is not particularly comfortable there. He knows he is an interloper and fears others will despise him for it.

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The breaks fall his way, however. One of his first clients at the club, Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode), wears his extraordinary wealth easily and invites Chris to join him and his family at the opera and then for a weekend at their estate. His sister Chloe (Emily Mortimer) is captivated by the handsome tennis pro, and her father (Brian Cox), ever eager to please his beloved daughter, brings Chris into the firm, where his future will be secure and more than comfortable.

Chris is not the only interloper. Tom's fiancée is Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson), an aspiring but unsuccessful actress from Boulder, Colo. The four principals form a matched set of couples: Tom and Chloe, brother and sister, are the establishment; Chris and Nola, their intended spouses, the arrivistes. After several family gatherings, Chris finds himself torn between the two women. Chloe provides the path to a level of security and status Chris could never achieve on his own. Nola, with her sensuous beauty, provides excite-

ment and passion. But with her earthiness and modest background, she will never break into the Hewett family circle, as Mrs. Hewitt (Penelope Wilton) makes absolutely clear after a third cocktail one evening. When the family finds a more suitable partner for Tom and Nola is cut out, the pressure on Chris intensifies. He will have to make a choice.

Allen builds momentum like Hitchcock at his best. As Chris feels ever more trapped, he resorts to lies that become transparent to both women. He even ponders murder, but he hesitates. Even if he could go through with it, which woman would he choose, and would he jeopardize his golden future simply to avoid the painful ordeal of separation from one of them? Does he have the sophistication to plan and execute a "perfect" crime? Could he maintain his poise during a police investigation? Would the police, with their working-class accents, follow form and defer to their social betters, or would they give in to class resentments and

pursue those of wealth and power with relish? Does Chris have a conscience at all, or if he does, is he capable of killing it? What will happen to him in the long run? Will his actions doom him to a life of remorse? Allen's sad conclusion is that none of these questions really make any difference. In Allen's grimly nihilistic worldview, there is no guilt or innocence, only survival.

This conclusion echoes the opening shot. Under a colorless English sky, the camera focuses on the top of a net, while a ball flies back and forth over it in slow motion. Finally, the ball hits the net and pops straight up, and the camera freezes it a foot above the upper lip, a shot that reappears in a slightly different form near the climax of the narrative. The ball could drop to either side, and the difference could mean victory or defeat in the game. Allen cuts away and refuses to show which way the ball drops. It will touch ground where it will, by random chance. In the long run, the outcome of the game makes no difference. It just happens.

**Richard A. Blake**



Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode, center) introduces his friend, Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), to his fiancée, Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson), in Woody Allen's new film, "Match Point."

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