Once More, Without Feeling

The comic story is not funny; the tragic one is not engaging.

IT'S HARD. Reviews of Woody Allen's new films generally break into two categories: The master hasn't lost his touch, or the master is in decline. Those of us who have followed Allen's career closely over the last 30 years and consider him the greatest American filmmaker of the post-studio generation carry an overwhelming burden. We measure his new films against the classics, when he was younger and so were we. We want desperately to praise each new installment of his auteurial *oeuvre*. We strive heroically to make allowances, arguing that he continues to grow and experiment with new forms, that his new films reference his older ones and Hollywood genres, that he has surrendered the jokes of his early films for character development and philosophic statement, that he is one of the few filmmakers addressing an adult audience in an age of blockbusters and computer-generated mayhem targeted to 12-year-olds. We encourage audiences to be grateful that he is still trying to say something.

Yes, it's all true, but it still makes it difficult to review a Woody Allen film without bringing a carload of baggage to the project. Would his films get a different reception if he had not made the great ones, like "Crimes and Misdemeanors," "Manhattan" or "Hannah and Her Sisters," before the current offering? What if this were a film by someone else? Is it possible to judge a new Woody Allen film on its own merits, without regret for a spent talent or reverence for an established master of the medium? As I say, it's hard.

Melinda and Melinda, to be blunt, does not rank high as a film by Woody Allen or by anybody else. Astonishing as it seems, the major problem lies in Allen's own script. He returns to familiar territory, the world of sophisticated Manhattanites dwelling on the fringes of the artistic community. They are young, insecure strivers, with beautiful, tastefully decorated apartments on the Upper East Side, with uncertain career prospects and no children. Although they are young, they speak lines more appropriate to people of Allen's age. His dialogue has always provided memorable jokes, but in this film, the characters try to verbalize memorable philosophic insights about the meaning of life, offering gnomic utterances rather than dialogue. Cocktail party chatter, flirtations and arguments alike seem larded with "significant" quotations, as though the characters had written out their profoundest thoughts from Philosophy 101 and delivered them with the expectation that they would be cited in collections of memorable screen lines along with "We'll always have Paris" and "Frankly, my dear." These shallow and supercilious beautiful people on the screen mouth their ponderous clichés without creating any sense of self-satire; they, and more to the point, Allen actually seem to believe that amid the convoluted syntax they are saying something important.

The plot itself embodies a similar heavy kind of philosophic reflection. Over dinner in a posh New York restaurant, two playwrights, Sy (Wallace Shawn), a comic author, and Max (Larry Pine), a writer of serious drama, debate the relative merits of their respective media. Their conversation is laced with pretentious generalities that could have been lifted from a celebrity interview on late-night television. They challenge each other to write his signature kind of play using the same material. They imagine a distraught young woman named Melinda breaking in on a dinner party hosted by one of her old classmates for her sophisticated friends. Her arrival acts as the catalyst for a chain reaction of adulteries and betrayals. Does the situation provide a better opportunity for comedy or tragedy, they wonder? In the intertwined twin narratives of the film, each playwright describes his own development of the story. Unfortunately, the comic story is not funny, and the tragic one is not engaging. At times it is difficult to recall which story is which. In the postmodern world that Allen tries to create in this film, comedy and tragedy are merely meaningless categories, since the universe is absurd and truth subjective. We can almost hear the author in the background challenging us to classify him and his films as comic or serious. The artistic imagination merely rearranges the pieces to fashion a coherent story, which can be either funny or tragic or both. In Allen's script, this underlying idea takes precedence over the dramatic action.

The characters in both stories seem old and tired beyond their years. Like insecure young people, they strive for recognition. Two are actors from Northwestern University trying to land better parts than television commercials; one is an assistant director trying to raise money for her own independent film; and another is an art history major from Brandeis, looking for a job in a gallery as a springboard to something else. Even though they still upholster their egos with college achievements as the high points of their lives, they seem quite secure financially and live in duplexes scarcely affordable to any but the marquee names of the New York artistic community. Unlike other aspiring artists, they do not have to wait on tables to pay the rent. A dentist who enters the plot for a brief interlude drives a Bentley

RICHARD A. BLAKE, S.J., is professor of fine arts and co-director of the film studies program at Boston College, Mass.

convertible and hosts a party at his Southampton home, which is lavish enough to provide a suitable getaway for Donald Trump. Some of the characters seem ready to destroy their future with alcohol and prescription drugs. As upwardly mobile young professionals, they may be still nurturing their ambitions for the future, but they are jaded at the same time. Allen has put old spirits in young bodies. They are burnt-out cases without ever having burst into flame.

Will Ferrell as Hobie, one of the unemployed actors, takes on the role of whining, self-centered bundle of insecurities that Allen usually plays in his own pictures. It doesn't work. Ferrell's physical size works against the fragilities of the character. He stammers and offers witty asides directly into the camera, as Allen does so effectively, but he cannot disappear into the background as a disengaged voice the way Allen does. When he fails as a husband and an adulterer, it is not because the universe is stacked against him; it is simply because he is dumb, and because he is oblivious to everyone around him. His cutting comments on the other characters lack conviction. He is a ventriloquist's dummy speaking Allen's words, but in his mouth the lines are more nasty than funny.

The cast, including Will Ferrell, gives the film its best shot and nearly salvages the script. Radha Mitchell in the title role shows a remarkable versatility as she appears in both stories. She can be self-destructive while unwittingly destroying everyone around her, and as the focus switches, she becomes everyone's best friend, fragile but fun. Chloë Sevigny plays Laurel, a woman of independent wealth. She is intelligent, balanced and compassionate toward her alcoholic actor husband (Jonny Lee Miller), but after playing a piano duet with Ellis (Chiwetel Ejiofor), she proves as fickle as everyone else in her circle.

"Melinda and Melinda" is a disappointment but not a surprise. For years Woody Allen has dismissed reviewers and critics as irrelevant to his work. He has written off audiences—in his best days his films were rarely box-office hits; now they have become only marginally profitable—and he has repeatedly asserted that he works only for himself. He has put together a team of familiar collaborators, who follow him from one film to another. The insulation from new, outside influences has served well in the past. It has allowed Woody Allen to create intensely personal, innovative films. At this point, however, it seems that the long isolation has exacted its price, as was inevitable. He has become more ruminative, chewing over his key ideas and theories and growing further away from engaging, interesting people and plausible situations. In the past Allen used his world of articulate but troubled Manhattanites to raise key questions about the human condition in this post-industrial age. With "Melinda and Melinda" he has reversed the process, using the closed Manhattan world of people like him to support the conclusions he has already reached. The film is not as much a drama of ideas as a set of familiar ideas in a dramatic setting.

Richard A. Blake