

Breaking laws with Alda and the Woodman

Crimes and Misdemeanors

Woody Allen, Mia Farrow, Alan Alda, Martin Landau, Anjelica Huston
directed by Woody Allen

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Drama and comedy have never combined to make such a heady, intense concoction. In Hollywood these days they market it as a hybrid: the "dramedy" (it's an ugly word, and they're ugly movies). Up in New York, meanwhile, Woody Allen, a filmmaker unto himself, has no time for such conventions.

For in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the 19th film he has written and directed, Allen smashes conformity with his startling mix of dramatic and comedic stories. Rarely has he been funnier, and his presentation of human nature's darker side has never been so affecting.

The screenplay's dual structure is established from the outset with the swift introduction of two, seemingly unconnected plots.

The first features Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), a successful ophthalmologist, who is deeply troubled. He has been carrying on an extramarital affair for two years and his mistress, Dolores (Anjelica Huston), has become unstable and demanding. She threatens to tell his wife, or expose his embezzlement of hospital funds, another crime of which Judah is guilty.

Unable to deal with the situation, Judah becomes increasingly anxious and looks for someone, or something, to turn to. Religion? His father molded him in the Jewish faith and he's been a skeptic ever since. "The eyes of God are on us always," his father said. And, although these words re-

RICHARD SMITH film

turn to haunt him now, Judah eventually goes to his brother Jack, a businessman with distinctly underworld connections.

Jack's blunt solution to the problem is to have the woman removed: malicious, contemplated murder. Judah can't protect his life without a "real world" response to his dilemma, Jack says. But Judah's not that kind of man.

Or is he? As a skeptic, he has come to see the world as harsh and empty of values. When Dolores calls him "a liar and an embezzler," his response is, "Don't you dare call me an embezzler."

Murder, it seems, is only another step. Judah doesn't like to think he can go through with it, but faced with the prospect of having his life seemingly destroyed, what else can he do? He doesn't see much wisdom in the words of a Rabbi patient and longtime friend Ben (Sam Waterston) and his talk of a "moral structure" for the world. Judah decides that "God is a luxury I can't afford."

On the surface, the film's comic subplot appears to have nothing to do with any of this, and that is part of its beauty. Clifford Stern (Woody Allen) makes documentaries that no one wants to see, his wife more or less ignores him ("the last time I was inside a woman was when I visited the Statue of Liberty," he says), and, what's worse, he has reluctantly agreed to make a film profiling his wife's creepy, hated brother Lester (Alan Alda) — an outrageously successful producer of TV comedies (it's a role Alda excels in. He was almost born to play it).

Cliff would much rather be giving life lessons to his niece (filmmaking,



Woody and Mia give us a taste of reality in 'Crimes and Misdemeanors'

he explains, "is a dog-eat-dog world... worse than that, it's dog doesn't return dog's phone calls"), and spending time on his current personal project — interviewing the wise Professor Louis Levy on the subjects of morality, love and the nature of human existence.

Meeting a producer, Halley (Mia Farrow), while shooting Lester's profile might be his chance for the Levy film to obtain a wide exposure. He also begins to fall in love with her. But so does the lecherous Lester.

Each story is a rich slice of New York life as only Allen can tell it. The comedy has the assured, on-target tone of *Oedipus Wrecks*, his delightful short film from *New York Stories*. It provides the perceptive hilarity we've come to expect from the writer of *Annie Hall* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*. The drama represents something more of an achievement, since Allen's recent experiments in this field (*September*, *Another Woman*) have been largely unseen and highly criticized. Here, at last, Allen has got it exactly, and his success is in no small part due to the serpentine twist of comedy and drama.

The effect each form has upon the other is arresting and thoroughly unexpected. It's a strange sensation to be laughing at a film with such serious matter at its heart. The tension created as the two stories interweave upsets our expectations and is ultimately disturbing. After the full horror of Judah's deed is revealed to him, the scene cuts to Betty Hutton singing "Murder He Says" from *Happy Go Lucky*, a 1943 musical Cliff has sneaked into one afternoon at a Bleeker Street revival house. In this, and other more subtle ways, the comic scenarios of Cliff's world heighten the drama of Judah's more serious

situation.

The two plots present a gamut of wrongdoings. Embezzlement, murder, playing hooky at the matinees, sexual perversity, the Holocaust, manipulating film, infidelity: where do they stand on a scale of human transgressions, and what are the character's response to them? Judah is rocked to his very depths by what he has done. While living under the guilt of it, he recognizes it as "pure evil." His world, once entirely secular, is now moral and just. His father's words return again: "The wicked will be punished for their sins."

'The world is a pretty cold place. It is only us and our capacity for love that gives meaning to the universe.'

— PROFESSOR LEVY

"I believe in God," he suddenly tells his wife. (Martin Landau is stunning in such moments: these words come out almost in spite of him.)

Cliff, meanwhile, is the "poor loser" who Lester identifies in one of the ridiculous screenplay ideas he intones to his personal recorder. Lester's approach to his work is uncouth and pompous: he represents everything that the little documentarian despises. And yet, in an absurd reversal of romantic convention, this comic vil-

lain emerges victorious.

It's the same such reversal of convention that makes the fate of Professor Levy so shocking. "The world is a pretty cold place," he says in a thick, Eastern European accent (he's almost a leftover from *Zelig*), "it is only us and our capacity for love that gives meaning to the universe." Even his wise words cannot sustain him. As Halley points out, like all philosophies, Levy's is incomplete. His sad demise goes against what we expect in life and on screen.

But then, this isn't a film. This, as the stories constantly remind us, is reality. It's part of the film's trick of dancing the fine line between fiction and the screenplay's "real life."

At the close, with the stories ostensibly wrapped up, Cliff and Judah meet for the first time and discuss the perfect murder (you almost suspect Allen's screenplay germinated from this scene). Judah tells his story. Cliff has no idea it's the truth — the film's reality — so he disagrees with the ending. To justify the forgiveness he inexplicably feels one day, Judah explains that it's not fiction: in real life "we rationalize and deny," he says. "Otherwise, we couldn't go on living."

It is the film's great question. How can Judah choose "not to be bothered by the ethics of his crime" when he knows his personal forgiveness confirms his worst fears about "the real world"? But then, Judah is a most evil, and fundamentally human, character.

"I told you it was a chilling story, didn't I?" he reminds Cliff. Cliff, downcast and despondent, is probably thinking about Levy. "Life is so unpredictable," the Professor once said. It's little wonder no one can get it right.

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