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Woody Allen's "Match Point" (2005)

By Steven Barnes

The very first line I ever heard Woody Allen speak was a joke on the Tonight show concerning theological issues, about how, during a divinity test, he cheated by "looking into the soul of the girl sitting next to me." I believe that he used a clip from such a stand up routine in one of his films, perhaps Annie Hall. I honestly don't remember. For decades, Woody has intertwined several basic themes: love and its yearnings. Faith. Talent and success. Human evil and the absence of God in the universe. And he does that thing that humor does: takes pain and fear, turns them inside out and makes us laugh. But behind the laughter has always been an extraordinarily keen mind and a troubled spirit.

Most of us agree that his marriage to his own step-daughter was a sign of a damaged psyche. Of course, he'd been warning us for decades that he was damaged goods, hadn't he? It wasn't until "Bullets Over Broadway" in which a murderous hit-man is revealed as a theatrical genius, did it finally hit me that he was obsessed with the question of why evil is not punished in the universe. Why, in fact, success seems to have no connection to the purity of the soul.

In "Crimes and Misdemeanors" he went further, encouraging us to empathize with a man capable of a terrible act...but that film sat on the fence, allowing us to argue about the right and wrong of things, rather than focusing us on the core question which has obviously chewed at his heart and mind since childhood.

No such mistake in "Match Point." In this film, which I consider one of his very best ever, he tells the story of a social-climbing tennis pro (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) who marries the boss's daughter (Chloe Hewett Wilton) while harboring a passion for his future sister-in-law (Scarlett Johanssen). The bedroom farce takes a rather dark turn (to say the least), leading to an action which very few people could find other than utterly reprehensible on every conceivable level. And to a diabolically clever ending. The theme, announced from the very beginning is that few of us want to face the fact that so much of life is based on luck. Specifically, luck as opposed to merit.

But to skip over all further plot details to address this theme, I think it's something of an Easter Egg. Look deeper, and the question is not merely one of luck, but one that asks: "Is there a God in the

Universe? If so, what is His nature, and why is he silent?"

I can't help but think that Woody is asking the wrong question. If, as I suspect, on one level he believes human beings are shallow and evil, and that he himself has achieved massive wealth and fame while deeply flawed and (he suspects) evil in his personal life, then where is the justice in the universe.

First of all, with this film, I found myself believing that Allen is a good man. Flawed, but good. The nature of the questions he has been asking his entire life, as opposed to what we know of his personal life, leads me to think him damaged but not damned. Just a personal opinion.

Secondly, I think that the key is not in "why are the wicked not punished" but the question "what is the nature of a good, successful life"? He has taken a perfectly reasonable approach: a beautiful spouse, wealth, health, public acclaim are a good life. That evil men and women can achieve this must be deeply troubling to him.

And troubles me not at all. It is possible of course that it is MY philosophy that is shallow, and his that cuts deep. I won't be self-congratulatory, or dogmatic enough to pat myself on the back, but I must stake out a position.

So here it is. I think that external measurements of success are wonderful, but ultimately satisfying only if they match our internal values. And from the cradle, we crave connection to love, to warmth, to that total acceptance we felt from our mothers, in the womb if nowhere else. And that this craving is totally unconscious, and that we spend the rest of our lives attempting to regain it.

When we sense that our own values and actions could be replicated by the entire world, to its benefit, I think that there is a sense of peace that simply cannot be put into words, a state of grace, of joy that those who have not experienced simply cannot believe in—as sociopaths cannot believe that human beings genuinely experience love and caring for one another. Such poor souls circle in the outer darkness. Say "I love you" to them, and they think "if only you knew what I really was, you wouldn't say that." Or worse, they think "poor, deluded fool, to feel such trivial, false emotions."

Of COURSE it is possible to achieve acclaim, and fame, and health, and hot sex and be evil. Evil is a judgment about things on a spiritual level, not on the level of business (although in general, honesty pays in business) or marriage contracts (you can lie and cheat, and your mate may never discover it) or fitness/health (I've known tremendously fit and long-lived people who were monsters).

Yet and still, Lifewriting asks us to embrace these three qualities as markers of inner worth. Why? Because they are the best, simplest external markers I know of. They are not infallible.

On a personal level, I believe that when our inner values and our outer actions are in alignment, and when those actions and values are transparent, so that we would stand before all mankind and say: "this is who I am. And I would want my children, and your children to be the same, and I am prepared to stand before the universe and say that I would be willing and happy to be treated as I have treated others" that there is a simple peace that comes from this that cannot be replaced by money, or sex, or even life itself.

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Those who have been abused, neglected, uncherished, often do not develop the spiritual sensory equipment to find their way to this place. The armies of lethal children found in inner cities around the third world (and sometimes the first world) attest to this: they have not experienced love, and therefore have no ability to empathize, or care about much beyond survival and simple pleasures.

What IS a good life? In my mind, the correct answer to this needs no God in the universe to punish the wicked, although a life lived in this fashion often opens an awareness (or to be fair, a belief) in the existence of the divine. To be separated from this sense is to be lost in an intellectual fog, trying to reason out the nature of things far larger than our minds. The intellect cannot go there, is the wrong tool. For decades Allen has tried to reason out his relationship with God, to understand the Holocaust in the framework of his childhood beliefs. I feel terribly sorry for him, and hope that he can forgive the world, and himself, in time to find peace in his life.

But meanwhile, I'm going to enjoy his ruminations. They are brilliant, and heartfelt, and heartbreakingly honest at this point in his life. "Match Point" is another of the best films of 2005, one which, unfortunately, I didn't see until 2006.

In retrospect, 2005 was one heck of a year for movies. I hope 2006 will be as fine.

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<http://www.lifewrite.com>

Film Review: Anything Else

By Caleb Booker

I went to see "Anything Else" because I heard an intriguing rumor that Woody Allen had cut all of his own scenes out of the movie. It turns out that not only was he in most of it, there were two of him.

"Anything Else" stars Woody Allen as schoolteacher and part time comedy writer "David Dobel" who, despite participating in two of the lowest paying jobs in the U.S., can afford a vintage Jaguar. He befriends Jason Biggs as "Jerry Falk", a full-time comedy writer who would really rather be writing depressing novels about the pointlessness of existence.

Let's just take a second to look at this "Jerry Falk" character. Somehow by his early twenties he's already divorced, in therapy, and has become a whiny babbling intellectual with a well-paying writing career. Basically, he's Woody Allen, just younger. Oh good, another Woody Allen! Sarcasm!

We're clubbed over the head with how "urban" and "contemporary" this "comedy" is. They walk the streets of New York or eat in fancy restaurants for most of the film. They name-drop as many writers as possible. (Oh yeah, I've read that!) They over-use their thesauruses. They mock the idea of owning a

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survival kit. They hunt down hard to find records and memorabilia. They're all either actors or writers or singers. They listen to jazz. They're all fake.

The "comedy" part comes in a few clever lines that I couldn't remember if my life depended on it. That speaks to the quality of the jokes folks, not my encroaching senility.

You might be noticing by now that all I've really said about the plot is that Allen befriends Biggs. That's because, frankly, that's all there is. Sure, there's the awkward romance between Biggs and Christina Ricci (the only person in the movie who puts some effort into the performance). Still, it doesn't really go anywhere. He's nuts, she's more nuts, they torture themselves and each other alternately, and nobody's really happy. It would be funny, but there's no hook or plot twist keeping them together, so instead it's just sad and tedious. That's the plot.

A five minute story stretched itself out over almost two hours and bored us to tears. It was painful. Sure, "Gigli" was bad, but at least it was ignorable. "Anything Else" practically DARES you to keep watching as it's moronic pseudo-intellectual neurotics tool around town doing little of significance except irritate the hell out of you.

There were maybe twelve people in the theater, and half of them left. The rest made conversation amongst themselves. Of course, I couldn't because I had to review the thing. I hate you Woody Allen!

I'm only giving "Anything Else" a 0 of 5 Whuffies because I promised myself I wouldn't use negatives in my ratings a long time ago. Don't see it on a bet.

Anything Else - 108 Minutes, or "103 minutes too long"
Directed by Woody Allen

Starring: Woody Allen, Jason Biggs, Stockard Channing, Danny DeVito, Christina Ricci, and apparently a complete hatred for the viewing public.

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