

## HANNAH AND HER SISTERS

*Production:* Robert Greenhut; released by Orion Pictures

*Direction:* Woody Allen

*Screenplay:* Woody Allen (AA)

*Cinematography:* Carlo di Palma

*Editing:* Susan E. Morse

*Art direction:* Stuart Wurtzel; set decoration, Carol Joffe

*Makeup:* Fern Buchner

*Costume design:* Jeffrey Kurland

*Music:* Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Johann Sebastian Bach, Giacomo Puccini, Jerome Kern, and others

*MPPAA rating:* PG-13

*Running time:* 107 minutes

*Principal characters:*

Mickey	Woody Allen
Elliott	Michael Caine (AA)
Hannah	Mia Farrow
April	Carrie Fisher
Lee	Barbara Hershey
Hannah's father	Lloyd Nolan
Hannah's mother	Maureen O'Sullivan
Dusty	Daniel Stern
Frederick	Max von Sydow
Holly	Dianne Wiest (AA)

*Hannah and Her Sisters* is the most widely acclaimed motion picture by writer-director Woody Allen since *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979). His two hits of the late 1970's which the new film most closely resembles. All three comedies are loosely autobiographical, warmly personal celebrations of the many loves in Allen's life: for his favorite locales in Manhattan, for various kinds of traditional music (classical works, Tin Pan Alley show tunes, and jazz standards), and for the beauties and foibles of his lovers and friends. All three films have their particular strengths and represent different breakthroughs for Allen in content and style, but ultimately *Hannah and Her Sisters* is the most expansive and accomplished of the three. In this regard, several critics have compared the film with more traditional art forms as a way of expressing their esteem for it as a work of high culture. Thus, according to these critics, while *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* might be considered Woody Allen's novellas or chamber pieces, *Hannah and Her Sisters* is his full-fledged novel or symphony.

Allen achieves this effect of high cultural heft through an ingenious syn-

thesis of his previous methods of structuring a narrative. In most of his earlier films, Allen built the plot around the comic *persona* that he plays as an actor: a wisecracking, neurotic nebbish. Because he was not ultimately satisfied with what he could accomplish with that character and structure, Allen excluded or altered this nebbish character in several later films. The most important of these in relation to *Hannah and Her Sisters* was the first Allen-directed film in which he did not appear: *Interiors* (1978), an Ingmar Bergman-style drama about the emotional problems of three sisters, their parents, and their lovers. Most critics and viewers, however, judged this film to be an oversolemn failure. Allen's brilliant stroke in *Hannah and Her Sisters* is to combine these two types of film, leaving the serious story (again one of three sisters, their parents, and their lovers) with more humor than in *Interiors*, and placing the nebbish character (here Mickey Sachs, a hypochondriac television producer) on the periphery of the main story rather than at the center as in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*. One critic has likened Allen's New York City in *Hannah and Her Sisters* to William Shakespeare's forest of Arden in *As You Like It*, and indeed Allen rules as wisely and benignly over his comic world as Shakespeare does over his. As in that Renaissance comedy, writer-director Allen keeps the action moving quickly, deftly shifting from one group of romantically involved characters to another, while also providing the contrasting perspectives of the metaphysical clown Mickey (who corresponds to Shakespeare's Touchstone) and the railing malcontent Frederick (Max von Sydow), a character much like Shakespeare's Jaques.

The concluding scene, set a year after Mickey and Holly's reunion, once again brings *As You Like It* to mind as it choreographs most of the major characters into a reaffirmation of what the film sees as a healthy community's values—in this case, those of marriage, childbearing, and the extended family. Allen's moving camera tracks through the satisfying spectacle of Thanksgiving at Hannah's, which is significantly more harmonious than the two Thanksgivings shown earlier in the film. Elliott has come to realize that he deeply loves Hannah, and Lee has married her Columbia professor. The mother and father (who earlier in the film suffered through a quarrel that Hannah helped them resolve) now gather with others around the piano to enjoy the father's rendition of "Isn't It Romantic?" The camera moves to a close shot of Holly seen in a dark mirror, and it seems for a melancholy moment as if she might still be cut off from the happiness of the family and all of its couples. Mickey enters the frame, the viewer learns that they are married, and in a *deus ex machina* as incredible and satisfying as the appearance of the marriage god Hymen in the final scene of *As You Like It*, Holly tells her husband that she is pregnant. Mickey—who has been earlier in the film as infertile, divorced, and suicidal—seems to have been brought back to productive life by the powers of laughter and marital love.

Many aspects of *Hannah and Her Sisters* show how masterful Woody Al-

ten has become in blending techniques of cinematic realism and stylization. The inexpensive production was shot entirely on location in New York City, and Allen worked closely with Carlo di Palma, the great Italian cinematographer of *Red Desert* (1964) and *Blow-Up* (1966), to achieve the precise emotional atmosphere he wanted for each scene—from the warmth of Hannah's apartment to the chill of Frederick's Soho loft to the grandeur of some of Manhattan's landmark buildings.

Allen chose his cast carefully, drawing both on his personal feelings for the people and on the associations that each carries into a film. In many ways the film is an affectionate valentine to Mia Farrow—Allen's close companion for a number of years and a star in his last five films. To underscore his feeling that Farrow is the center of a loving world that radiates out from her, Allen used Farrow's apartment as Hannah's apartment, cast Farrow's mother, Maureen O'Sullivan, as Hannah's mother, and included seven of Farrow's eight children as Hannah's children. Allen saw in Barbara Hershey not only the ideal object for a brother-in-law's lust but also an intelligent and feeling woman, and she rises to the opportunity with a fine performance. Michael Caine, with his reserved manner, understated sex appeal, and hint of a larcenous spirit, was the perfect choice for the adulterous Elliot. In the role of the raging painter, Max von Sydow brought to the film a powerful charge of angst and torment from his many films with Ingmar Bergman. Hollywood veteran Lloyd Nolan, who died shortly after the film was completed, provided an immensely poignant stimulus to the audience's memories as the father who enjoys nothing better than sitting at the piano, and playing his old sweet songs. Dianne Wiest, Carrie Fisher, Julie Kavner, and Sam Waterston were cast with the same overriding intelligence and directed with the same intimate skill.

Allen's skill at choosing and directing actors is further enhanced by his meticulous attention to both costumes and music. In interviews, Barbara Hershey has marveled at how definite Allen's ideas were about how his actresses should be clothed, and the results add much to their characterizations: plain, toned-down, masculine clothes for Lee (which ironically increase her sexual vibrancy), tailored earth tones for the frantic Holly, and a busy array of pinks, searves, and offbeat styles for the perfect Hannah. Despite the wide variety of musical styles included in the film, no musical director is listed in the credits, but it is likely that Allen took charge of that function himself. His tastes in jazz and classical music have been featured prominently on his sound tracks ever since *Sleeper* (1973), but in *Hannah and Her Sisters* the music is more closely involved with the action than ever before. Certain pop standards—"You Made Me Love You," "Bewitched," and "I've Heard That Song Before"—are repeated throughout the film in connection with all the film's romances: These are the stages, the songs seem to say, that all intense love stories go through. At other times, the music serves as an ironic counterpoint: The deep emotions that the architect David professes to feel during an opera performance do not extend to his human relationships, and the ebullient accompaniment to Mickey's release from his brain tumor scare—"Count Basie's "Back to the Apple"—seems incongruous when Mickey abruptly stops short on the sidewalk with his newest anxiety.

Ultimately, however, it is Woody Allen's mastery of narrative and visual form that gives the film a feeling of such simultaneous control and expansiveness. On the one hand, some of his techniques create the impression of a carefully designed analytic novel. His insertion of titles on the dark screen between scenes seems to divide the film into chapters, and by presenting the voice-over ruminations of five major characters (Elliot, Lee, Mickey, Holly, and Hannah), Allen skilfully creates an effect of alternating among limited first-person points of view. On the other hand, he is also capable of shifting from such a limited viewpoint to a more comprehensive view of social situations which are so expansive or volatile that it is hard to conceive of them being contained by the linear, analytic discourse of a novel. To this end, Allen has become a master of the moving camera and the long take, which sometimes allow him to connect the diverse but related activities of a number of characters in motion (as in the Thanksgiving scenes in Hannah's apartment) and at other times enable him to suggest the surging complexity of people's conflicting feelings (as in the powerful scene where Frederick discovers Lee's affair and she declares that she is moving out). Conversely, Allen is also adept at shifting from a comprehensive to a limited point of view. In a scene where the three sisters are about to have lunch together, Allen stops his moving camera for a long shot in which Hannah and Lee pause at the entrance to the restaurant. The camera sees Lee, but its view of Hannah is momentarily cut off by a wall. Nevertheless, the viewer then hears Hannah saying to Lee, "I can't believe Elliot, and I can't think of someone nice for you to go out with." Thus, very subtly, Allen shifts momentarily to Lee's point of view and conveys how a sharp pang of guilt makes her feel isolated from her unsuspecting and generous sister. Further, several memorable vignettes in the film occur when Allen pauses from his camera movement for lingering close shots that adore one of the sisters in a particularly beautiful moment: Lee as seen by Elliot in the opening scene of the film, Hannah by her father's piano after she has brought peace to a parental spat, Holly as seen by Mickey inside the record store as he is about to fall in love with her.

A number of Woody Allen's less admiring critics have often raised the question of whether he is capable of making a film that is not constricted by his own obsessions, with characters that are something more than reflections of his own ego. The answer suggested by *Hannah and Her Sisters* is a triumphant but qualified yes: if he provides his ego with a circumscribed place within the film. By consigning the character of Mickey Sachs to the periphery of the narrative through most of the film, Allen is able to exercise his obsessions with death and meaninglessness without imposing them on the other characters or the film as a whole. This strategy enables him both to develop a contrasting perspective on the other characters and to view them with a more open responsiveness than he has demonstrated in earlier films. The richly comic spectacle that results—the spectacle of a number of intelligent people struggling and growing through a period of their own individual befuddlements—makes *Hannah and Her Sisters* Woody Allen's most dramatically satisfying achievement to date.