

Crimes and Misdemeanors ★★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

A new Woody Allen movie is usually a cause for celebration. But in recent years, the director's forays into straight drama and his absence from the screen have been a cause for trepidation more than anything else. Happily, Allen fans everywhere can break out the champagne: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (his 19th film) is a gem!

The movie is one of the few I've seen where the two main characters don't even meet until the final scene. *Crimes* is composed of two almost entirely unrelated story lines, and each has its own unique flavor. The weaker of the two involves Martin Landau as a philandering husband who decides to call it quits with his mistress of two years (Angelica Houston). The problem is she won't accept his decision and threatens to expose their affair. Landau is faced with a moral crisis when his Mafioso brother suggests they solve his dilemma by liquidating the troublesome mistress. Landau doesn't think he is capable of such evil, but at the same time he feels like he's backed into a corner.

Straight drama has never been Allen's strength; just watch *Interiors* or *Another Woman* and you'll know what I mean. But surprisingly, the dramatic story line in *Crimes* is anything but impotent. Landau, coming off his Oscar-nominated performance in *Tucker*, strikes gold again in *Crimes*. Allen gives the actor a profound role, and Landau does it justice. He brings out the character's desperation, making him sympathetic in an odd sort of way.

Houston is a revelation as the neurotic lover. I'll never understand why her performance in *Prizzi's Honor* received so much hoopla. However, there's no denying that Houston is simply phenomenal in *Crimes* as a woman grasping at straws, composed at one minute and a basket case at the next. Houston's performance is worthy of an Oscar.

Allen juxtaposes the somber and humorless story of marital infidelity with a comic tale of romantic angst. And, thankfully, this half of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is vintage Woody Allen. To borrow a line from a beer commercial: it just doesn't get any better than this! The icing on the cake is Allen's participation in front of the camera as well as behind it.

Allen plays a struggling documentary filmmaker who falls in love with a TV-producer played by whom else but Mia Farrow. Somehow, after 10 films, the on-screen chemistry between the real-

life couple is as fresh and magical as ever. But Allen is not Farrow's only suitor in the film. His brother-in-law, a rich and powerful TV-executive played by Alan Alda, also is courting her. And once you mix in Allen's wife, sister, and niece, you have a flood of characters—and I've mentioned only half of them.

Fortunately, Allen always has been a master at juggling large ensemble casts—for example, *Hannah and Her Sisters*. With *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, he once again demonstrates his knack for letting each cast-member shine no matter how small the part. Alda, always a welcome presence, is playing against type in his role as the egomaniacal TV-sitcom creator. He pulls out all the stops in a tour de force performance. Something about his arrogance is irresistibly charming.

As the strong-willed, sharp-tongued, and upwardly mobile TV-producer, Farrow is, as usual, both alluring and beguiling. If you think Farrow has been missing out in any way by appearing only in Allen's films, consider the diversity of the characters she has been able to play. Farrow is convincing whether she is a shy, timid mental case (*September*), a loudmouth mob-girl (*Broadway Danny Rose*), or a no-nonsense, career woman (*Crimes*).

And let's not forget Allen himself, who never fails to astonish me as actor, let alone as a director. His humor is still razor sharp and his vulnerability touchingly poignant. Even his smallest facial expressions can send you into tears or into hysterical laughter depending on the scene. Allen is a joy to behold, whether he is schmoozing with his niece or bickering with his wife and brother-in-law.

Amidst all the talk about the performances, I've neglected to mention how thematically rich the film is. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is chock full of existential quandaries about life, death, God, religion, morality, and blowing off work to go to the movies. At times, Allen goes too far and hits you over the head with his philosophical conundrums. In any case, it's probably better if I leave these deeper issues to the English majors and the Philosophers.

I don't want to give the impression that *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is cold and analytical. Yes, the film is deadly serious, but not at the expense of fun. Whenever the dramatic tension builds to a crescendo, Allen cuts away for some comic relief. The movie is overflowing with hilarious one-liners

and comic performances.

Crimes and Misdemeanors is truly a return to form for Allen. The effective fusion of comedy and

drama makes the film one of his best to date, and certainly one of 1989's finest.

© 1989 – Randy Parker - All Rights Reserved
<http://www.emusements.com/randy/RRI/>