

A comedy of terrors

by Michael Graham

Woody Allen is perhaps the most critically acclaimed and prolific filmmaker working today. Openings to his films are an annual event. More than annual actually, as he has produced eleven films during the '80s and this is his fourth film released since 1990.

MOVIE REVIEW
Manhattan Murder Mystery
Director: Woody Allen
Oxford Theatre

Allen not only directs his films—he also writes the screenplays, does the scoring, and almost always plays one of the leading roles. Although the character he plays does not tend to vary far from the life-questioning, machine-fearing hypochondriac, the films themselves are scattered completely across the spectrum—ranging from completely dramatic to ridiculous comedy. This time around, we are treated to a classic Woody Allen romp.

Larry (Allen) and Carol Lipton (Diane Keaton) are in a comfortable, but mundane marriage. Mundane, that is, until Carol becomes obsessed with a possible murder just a few doors away in their apartment building. The wife of an elderly man (Jerry Adler) supposedly had a heart attack, but Carol doesn't believe this for a second and begins her sleuthing—determined to bring the murderer to justice.

When Larry becomes too cynical about her various murder theories, Carol teams up with a more enthusiastic friend, Ted (Alan Alda). Together they begin their search for clues by stalking the old man and even breaking into his apartment. Eventually, when the pieces of the puzzle begin to

fit, Carol's husband, an editor, and one of his writers (Angelica Houston) join in the intrigue.

Manhattan Murder Mystery succeeds as a mystery. There are so many twists to it that I gave up trying to guess how the murder was committed within 20 minutes. It also succeeds as a hilarious comedy—for three main reasons: the return of Marshall Brickman as co-writer and the return of Diane Keaton, both of whom have been absent from Allen's work since *Manhattan* in 1979. The third reason is simply that Woody Allen knows how to make a comedy work on a level stratospheres above run-of-the-mill blockbusters.

"I'm commanding you to sleep. Sleep! I command it. I command it. Sleep!"

Marshall Brickman and Woody Allen co-wrote *Sleeper* (1973), *Annie Hall* (1977), and *Manhattan* (1979). Brickman may or may not be responsible for some of the hilarious lines in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, but he is probably the force that made the plot flow smoothly. The film was well-paced, and that, I think, it is to Brickman's credit. He considers himself to be concerned mainly with structure and plot development, whereas Allen has an intuitive genius for linking scenes.

The dialogue, monologue and one-liners in this movie are inspired. At one point, although Larry (a Jew) has agreed to go to a Wagner opera with Carol, he ends up walking out stating "I was getting a sudden, uncontrollable urge to conquer Poland!!" In another

scene, Carol decides to break into the neighbour's apartment in the middle of the night. Larry, who wakes up tired and unamused, tells her what a nutcase she is and as she is preparing to go he tries to take action: "As your husband; I'm commanding you to sleep. Sleep! I command it. I command it. Sleep! I forbid you to go. I'm forbidding..." She walks off. "Is that what you do when I forbid you?"

It was great to finally see Diane Keaton and Woody Allen reunited. She is the perfect energetic contrast to Woody's cynical, neurotic screen persona. The two have terrific chemistry and have been one of the best comedic pairs in film, since *Sleeper* or *Love and Death* in the mid-70s. She has a contagious exuberance and sense of fun which had been sadly lacking through the '80s when Mia Farrow was Woody's main female lead.

The moral dilemmas which permeate some of Allen's best films may be missing from *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, but we are treated to a full complement of cynical wit, hilarious dialogue, and great situational and physical humour. This is a return to the great Woody Allen comedy. In many ways it reminded me of *Sleeper*, mostly because of the hilarious Keaton-Allen scenes and the Chaplinesque physical humour. Seeing Woody, the "world renown claustrophobic", react to being trapped in an elevator is screamingly hilarious. Then there is the poker scene, the tape recorder scene, the police interrogation scene... this is cinematic humour at its best. Unfortunately, because the masses flock to the typical, big name, formulaic Hollywood "comedies" this movie probably will not have a long run, so catch it while you can.

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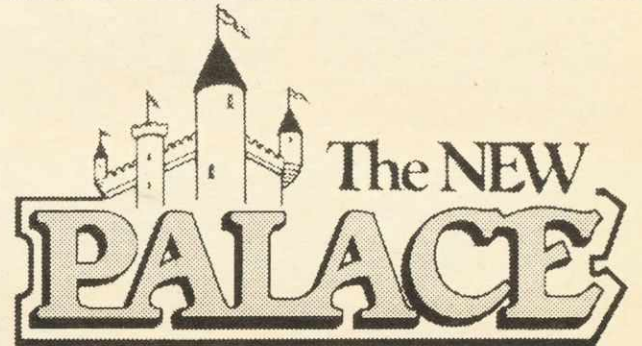
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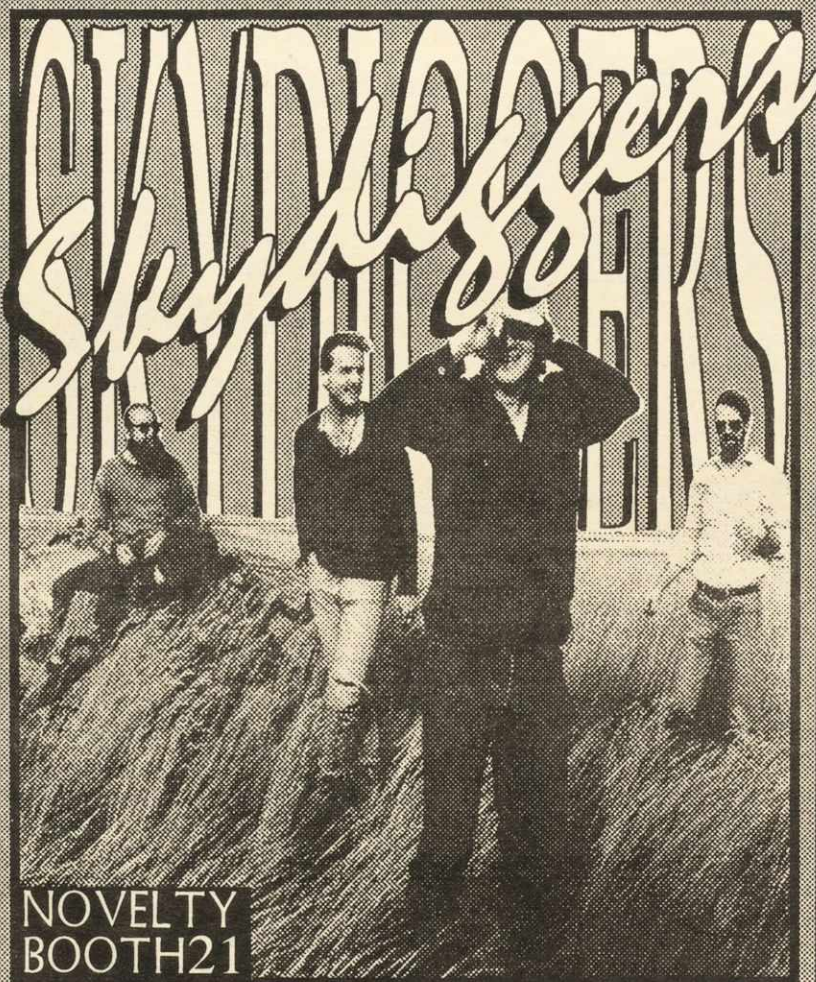
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