Woody Allen's movies are instantly recognizable, and Crimes and Misdemeanors is no exception. Woody Allen writes, directs, and stars as Cliff Stern, a maladjusted, middle-aged neurotic in New York. However, the lead role is played by Martin Landau (Judah Rosenthal), an aging ophthalmologist who's gotten in a little too deep in his infidelity. This is Landau's first appearance in a Woody Allen movie, along with Alan Alda, Anjelica Huston, Claire Bloom, Jerry Orbach, and Caroline Aaron. Also starring is Mia Farrow, whose presence is by now de rigueur for Allen.

Crimes and Misdemeanors reminded me of TV sitcoms and comedy-dramas. Snappy one-liners drew quick laughs from the audience, and there was even a sight gag or two — I found it significant that most of the Judah's and his rabbi's discussions about God and morality took place in the dark. The ensemble cast and multilayered plot, combined with frequent scene changes, are reminiscent of Hill Street Blues or L.A. Law. But this movie deals with deep human issues: Is there a God? Should people be moral? The contrast and jittery pace are disorienting, but the movie manages to keep your attention.

The movie deals primarily with human relationships, as all the characters are either on the verge of divorce or looking for a partner. Judah is having an affair with Dolores Paley (Angelica Huston), who wants him to divorce his wife. Cliff, a fringe documentary maker, gets a job through his wife's slimy TV producer brother (Alan Alda), but the only good thing about the job is the opportunity to pursue Halley Reed (Mia Farrow).

Much moral discussion occurs in some clumsy family scenes; it's all done within a Jewish context that is intriguingly different than a Christian one. Allen uses these cues to package his message, which is rather depressing once you stop laughing. The movie's course is unpredictable, and the ending leaves you somewhat unsatisfied. As a whole, the movie is messy but realistic.

If you've never seen a Woody Allen movie, this one is a good introduction. Allen's forte is complex subtlety and making his audience think about themselves and laugh while doing it. He doesn't use standard Hollywood shock schlock or action scenes in place of plot. The challenge is buried deeper and follows you around for several days. This was a good movie and the students at the LSC sneak preview last Thursday got lots of laughs. Perhaps they also got a little food for thought about the nature of man and moral conduct.