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THE ARTS

Sexual tensions compliment action in Manhattan Murder

MANHATTAN MURDER MYSTERY

Directed by Woody Allen
Screenplay by Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman
Starring Alan Alda, Woody Allen, Anjelica Huston, and Diane Keaton

Loews Theater

By Matthew H. Hersch

Matthew H. Hersch

Manhattan Murder Mystery isn’t the best film I’ve ever seen. After all, I don’t like murder mysteries. I think they’re dull. Most drag in the beginning and end preposterously. I don’t like tributes to famous old movies, either. I haven’t seen most of them — and don’t intend to.

Yet Manhattan Murderer, which is both a murder mystery and a tribute to fossilized flicks, is strangely satisfying. In this, Woody Allen’s latest tale of angst-ridden New York intellectuals, book editor Larry Lipton (Allen) is dragged into the investigation of an upstairs neighbor’s suspicious death by his energetic but bored wife Carol, played — of course — by Diane Keaton. The two are not alone in their vigilante quest — joining them are Lipton’s family friend Ted (Alan Alda), a divorced playwright, and Marcia Fox (Anjelica Huston), a black-clad, aggressively sexy author. The murder investigation provides just the spark they needed to perk up all of their lives.

As in any Allen film, sexual tensions complement the action. Carol and Larry love each other, but their marriage is vaguely dysfunctional. Lonely Ted yearns to Carol, and Carol enjoys the attention. Marcia, an attention magnet, has targeted Larry. Larry returns the compliment, and when Ted too begins to fall for Marcia, Carol is left doubly peeved.

The result is $6.50 worth of stakeouts, soulful stares, sexual stress, and silliness.

Like Annie Hall and Love and Death, Woody, casting this familiar Allen spin on this familiar film type, proves once again that he is one of the few writer/directors that can be relied upon to deliver in a cinematic universe filled with flops.

Manhattan Murder Mystery isn’t his best work, but it’s good enough. It has its flaws, (I would have preferred more satire, more laughs) but they don’t detract too much from the total enjoyment. The Allen/Keaton pair, much admired for their assaults on science fiction, Russian literature, and neurotic urban relationships, make a fine tribute to the murder mystery genre, even as they dig their heels into it. Alda gives an honest, believable performance, and Angelica Houston, as Woody’s would-be temptress, provides a fresh face in Allen films that this critic hopes will return.

The film’s inquisitive heroes are neither super sleuths nor professionals — they are bored, restless middle-aged folks and barely competent for the task at hand. Allen, on whom the bulk of the drama eventually falls, provides a refreshing dose of cynicism in a cinematic world in which the man on the street, thrust into the world of danger, reacts with a cool head and steady hand. Intelligent, perceptive, but blithering and clutzy, Allen is the everyman detective, who battles the forces of darkness without the self-confidence with which most movie heroes are amply supplied. Fumbling, break-ins, impersonating a police officer — badly — Allen shows he’s lost none of the wit he harnessed in films like Annie Hall and Love and Death.