



Crimes and misdemeanors

Director: Woody Allen

Country: USA

Date: 1989

Review by Damian Cannon of Movie Reviews UK in 1997.

A perfectly pitched combination of comedy and tragedy, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* adds murder to the well-established list of Allen concerns. At a prestigious dinner, renowned fund-raiser and solid public figure Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau) is being honoured for his achievements. As the speaker prepares the crowd, Judah looks a little nervous and flushed to his wife Miriam (Claire Bloom). The cause isn't his speech though, it's due to the fact that a letter addressed to Miriam arrived at their house this morning, from his highly-strung lover Dolores Paley (Anjelica Huston). She's trying to get in contact with his wife, in order to reveal all, because he's decided to terminate their relationship, after two years of fun on the side. Judah's come to realise that he can't take the stress of lying anymore whereas Dolores always thought that he'd leave Miriam, leaving them in a classic stalemate situation.

Somewhere else in New York, Cliff Stern (Woody Allen) is taking his niece Jenny (Jenny Nichols) to the pictures. He should probably be taking her to a museum or something, for the good of her education, but so what! This is about his only escape from the worries of everyday life, such as the fact that he's a struggling documentary film-maker putting together pieces that nobody wants to pay for. In addition, his wife Wendy (Joanna Gleason) hasn't slept with him for a year, a symptom of their decaying marriage. It doesn't help that her brother Lester (Alan Alda) is a famous and rich TV producer though, who Cliff hates because they compare so badly. The strange thing is that Lester wants Cliff to film a documentary about him, though he makes it quite clear that he's only offering the opportunity as a favour to Wendy.

The connection between the two familial groups is Ben (Sam Waterston), Wendy's other brother, a rabbi and favourite of Cliff's. He's also a patient of Judah's, seeing as he's an ophthalmologist and Ben has a steadily worsening eye condition. As Judah struggles with the end of an adulterous relationship, Cliff finds himself drawn towards one when he meets attractive production assistant Halley Reed (Mia Farrow) while filming Lester.

She appears to have many similar interests, even to the extent that Cliff's in-progress footage of Prof. Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann) holds her attention. The only drawback is that Lester exhibits amorous intentions towards Halley and he doesn't have the minor burden of being already married! Meanwhile, Judah meets with his rarely seen brother Jack (Jerry Orbach) and discusses the unthinkable solution to his insoluble problem.

Crimes and Misdemeanors is possibly one of Woody Allen's most ambitious films, seeking as it does to shed light upon the human situation while still churning out the usual gags. It's a testament to his directorial maturity that the film largely succeeds, generating a certain level of suspense because it's really not obvious what choices the characters will make (given that there's no need to provide a Hollywood happy ending). The only area in which the movie comes close to breaking down is over the sheer number of characters introduced and the impossibility of doing all of them justice (fascinating though everyone is). The central themes deal with the unfairness of life, the inability to be faithful to one person, jealousy, love, guilt and so much more, all of them introduced with far more subtlety than listing them would suggest. The twin lives of Judah and Cliff encompass all of these emotional trip-wires, yet their markedly different approach to life makes all of the difference (in a way that suggests an empty, godless, moral-vacuum type universe).

In a departure from movies dependent wholly on jokes and funny lines, Allen makes *Crimes and Misdemeanors* reliant upon decent roles and harmonious ensemble acting. The members of the cast spin around each other in a never-ending dance, realistic in their actions yet imperfect and flawed. As one of the central figures, Landau vividly portrays the conflict of conscience which threatens to overwhelm him after Jack has helped out. The surprise is that he expected Dolores to act in any other way after he turned her life upside-down (a fine if one-sided performance by Huston). At the other end of the scale, Cliff is unconcerned by the immorality of adultery, mainly because he isn't successful enough to get this far. From a self-proclaimed righteous position, he comments on and puts down the lives of others, motivated by the fact that they have what he hasn't. It's a nice piece of acting by Allen, with the character well-tuned to his strengths.

While the film ultimately suggests that life is unjust, that people don't always suffer the consequences of their actions, it also allows hope, in the sense that happiness is where you find it. It doesn't make for a very equitable situation but it does mean that you should make the most out of the only life you'll ever get. In seeking to address these topics, Allen weaves numerous flashbacks into the narrative, each appearing when necessary and illuminating just enough of the present to create a context.

Similarly, film clips are used to provide knowing links between scenes, effective even if the external references pass you by (this technical adeptness is mirrored within the character of Cliff when he shows his documentary of Lester - a stunningly effective destruction which cuts between shots of Lester to a wildly posturing Mussolini). Hence, for once, Allen retains full control of the movie and manages to draw the tales together in a reasonably satisfying way.