

# Ghost town

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Melinda and Melinda, *written and directed by Woody Allen*

*Melinda and Melinda* is the latest in a recent series of very poor films written and directed by Woody Allen. Indeed it has been 13 years since Allen produced a work, *Husbands and Wives*, that was worth something as a whole. The presence of certain performances or personalities—John Cusack and Jennifer Tilly in *Bullets Over Broadway*, Mira Sorvino in *Mighty Aphrodite*, Leonardo DiCaprio and Charlize Theron in *Celebrity*, Sean Penn and Samantha Morton in *Sweet and Lowdown*—partially obscured the fact that the director-writer had run out of things to say, but the fact has become too obvious to conceal by this point.

The new film's premise is that life is either tragic or comic, depending on the way one looks at it, or both. A group of four New Yorkers is sitting around a restaurant table. One writes comedies, another tragedies. They argue about the respective merits of their efforts. A third man at the table tells a story about a woman barging in on a dinner party. Two intercut versions of the ensuing story then unfold, one ostensibly 'tragic,' one 'comic.'

In the tragic version, Melinda (Radha Mitchell)—it is she who comes uninvited to the dinner party hosted by Laurel (Chloë Sevigny) and Lee (Jonny Lee Miller)—is fleeing a desperate situation. Finding herself in a staid and unsatisfying marriage, she entered into a love affair. She has lost custody of her children and attempted suicide. 'Tragic' Melinda gets involved in another doomed relationship in her new life too.

'Comic' Melinda (also played by Mitchell) lives downstairs from Hobie (Will Ferrell) and his wife Susan (Amanda Peet), the hosts of the interrupted dinner party. Hobie falls for her, complicating and disrupting his marriage. She, meanwhile, has started a relationship with a new boyfriend. He longs for her. One thing leads to another. This version has a happy

ending.

The tragic strand is not particularly tragic, the comic not especially comic. At times one has a difficult time remembering which is which, and not because some insightful comment about the 'tragi-comic' character of the human condition is being offered, but because both segments lack sharpness and purposefulness.

Nothing is worked through to the end. There are countless, unintentional red herrings. Characters appear, seem to carry a certain dramatic weight, and disappear, without anything having been established about their presence. Nearly everything in the film simply happens, blandly, rather pointlessly. The actors, some of them quite talented, stand there in front of the camera, with lines and arguments that hardly go anywhere, floundering. *Melinda and Melinda* simply sits there on screen, inert, flat, unmoving (in both senses of the word).

Mitchell is pleasant enough, but, like many contemporary performers, lacks depth and texture. She is not the remotest bit convincing as a potential suicide and, we learn, worse. Ferrell is the most appealing presence in the film, but he's given little to work with. Sevigny, a remarkable performer, as the hostess of the 'tragic' dinner party, is almost entirely wasted. The discussion of the 'tragic' and 'comic' never rises above the banal.

Allen, a genuine comic talent, never had a great deal to say about the world. In his films from 1977 to 1992, *Annie Hall* to *Husbands and Wives* (*Crimes and Misdemeanors* [1989] was one of the better Reagan-era films), he stood out against the general decline of American filmmaking by defending some principle of old-fashioned, contrarian, self-deprecating, quasi-cultured New York liberalism. A good deal of the comic business stemmed not so much from his embodying anything important, but from what he hadn't succumbed to. He *wasn't* going Hollywood,

*wasn't* making blockbusters, *wasn't* getting fabulously wealthy and indulging himself, *wasn't* abandoning music and literature, *wasn't* giving up on Bergman and Freud and Fellini, etc. He also had the talents of the very gifted Mia Farrow at his disposal for a number of those years.

The Allen persona wore thin a good many pictures ago, but it carried him through until the early 1990s. Various factors, including personal ones, may have caused him to lose his way so dramatically, but no doubt social changes played a decisive role. The milieu that he lovingly, if sardonically, chronicled has disintegrated. At its upper, wealthiest end it has become a source of support for law-and-order, free-market Republicans. Many of New York City's so-called cultural intelligentsia signaled their shift by supporting Rudolph Giuliani in 1993.

New York City's official web site explains: "His [Giuliani's] message of fiscal responsibility and attention to quality of life concerns [i.e., shunting the homeless off the streets and subways] resonated with New Yorkers, who elected him over incumbent David Dinkins. ... To reduce crime, he implemented a 'zero tolerance' approach, placing an emphasis on enforcing laws against nuisance crimes as well as serious offenses. ... To stimulate the city's stagnated economy, Giuliani reduced the tax burden by eliminating the Commercial Rent Tax in most areas of the city, reducing the Hotel Occupancy Tax, and eliminating the Unincorporated Business Tax. ... [A] national financial magazine named New York City the most improved American city in which to do business. ...

"Faced with a \$2.2 billion budget gap upon taking office, Giuliani lowered projected spending by \$7.8 billion through a series of cost cutting measures and productivity improvements. He reduced the city's payroll by over 20,000 jobs without layoffs. ... In 1993, 1.1 million New Yorkers were receiving welfare. To bring an end to a philosophy that encouraged dependency on public assistance, Giuliani implemented the largest workfare program in the nation. Since his welfare reforms were enacted in March of 1995, 340,000 people have been moved off the rolls, saving \$650 million annually in city, state and federal funds."

It would be hard to improve on this as a guide to the general evolution of certain upper middle class layers in Manhattan. One would perhaps only need to add a

graph showing the meteoric rise in the stock market in the 1990s. Allen's milieu largely threw its lot in with the barbarians some time ago. And he goes on pretending as if nothing has happened. But these developments have had consequences for his art, hollowing it out, rendering it lifeless.

One scene stands out: the party at which the 'tragic' Melinda (at least I think it's the tragic one) meets her new love. First of all, the vast, sumptuously decorated Upper East Side apartment would be out of reach for nearly anyone but a millionaire these days. A leisurely medium shot takes in the guests standing around, in their blazers and ties and tasteful evening dresses, sipping drinks, listening to classical music skillfully played on the piano, presumably discussing love and psychoanalysis and literature and who knows what else, and one suddenly realizes why it all looks so terribly, terribly unreal, almost *touchingly* unreal—this is a gathering of phantoms. One can see why the camera remains at a certain distance; if it were to move in too close one would surely be able to see right through what *must be* paper-thin, two-dimensional figures.

This is light from a dead star. The party only exists in Allen's brain, as a memory or perhaps a fantasy, a crowd of cultured, moneyed, sophisticated, liberal-minded New Yorkers.

It is impossible to accomplish much of anything, comic, tragic or otherwise, on such a basis. It may be painful at times to look life and reality in the face, but they remain the only basis for art.



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