Woody Allen directs Match Point: No Dreiser

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Match Point, *written and directed by Woody Allen*

Woody Allen's new movie, *Match Point*, begins with a shot of a tennis court as a voice-over introduces one of the film's central themes: "The man who said 'I'd rather be lucky than good' saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think so much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck, it goes forward and you win...or maybe it doesn't, and you lose."

A pretty poor beginning. Even in the American sports world, guided by pragmatism to the greatest degree, luck is never given sole pride of place. It is treated as something subordinated to skill and experience. As for the man who would rather be lucky than good, *Match Point* proves that such an individual does not see or understand deeply and is hardly worth considering.

A one-time, second-rank tennis pro from a modest Irish background, Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), sets himself up as a tennis instructor in an exclusive club. His calculation that this will prove to be an entry into the world of wealth and power is vindicated when he befriends Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode), who invites him to join his family in their private box at the Royal Opera House.

Chris's charm—along with his obsequiousness—immediately wins over the Hewett family. His acceptance into one of England's premier clans is made permanent by his marriage to Tom's sister, Chloe (Emily Mortimer), a sweet, innocuous girl, who is as happy attending Verdi's *Rigoletto* or *La Traviata* as she is Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Woman in White*.

Tom's fiancée, Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson), an aspiring American actress, is less polished and obviously less "self-motivated" than Chris (an opera lover and reader of Dostoyevsky). The elder Hewetts, Alec and Eleanor (Brian Cox and Penelope Wilton), frown upon her. Despite the fact that Chris and Nola are both social outsiders who must tread lightly, they begin a reckless affair. But luck saves Chris from ruining his chances with the Hewetts when Tom breaks off the engagement and Nola disappears from their lives. Now there is no limit as to how far Chris can rise in the Hewett corporate empire, with Alec assuring Chris that he cannot fail no matter what.

Chris enjoys the lifestyle of the mega-rich, bouncing around the Tate Modern and London's posh districts. When Nola shows up again, driven as much by lust as by ambition, Chris is prepared to throw caution to the wind. They resume their affair despite Chloe's unrelenting demands on Chris to start a family. Menacingly, Nola becomes pregnant.

Chris finds it more and more difficult to work both sides of the street. When his hand is forced, luck again ensures a soft landing.

Match Point contains certain *externals* of an interesting film—the class issues, the parallels to Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and the Scott Peterson case. (Peterson was convicted in California in November 2004 of murdering his pregnant wife. At a certain point Peterson lied to his lover about his whereabouts, claiming to be enjoying New Year's celebrations in Paris when he was actually in northern California. Clearly echoing this, Allen has Chris tell Nola in one scene—in an effort to buy time—that he is on a Mediterranean cruise when, in fact, he is in London with his wife and in-laws.)

At the time of the Peterson conviction, the WSWS wrote: "Who is writing the Scott and Laci Peterson 'tragedy?' As far as we know, no one. America has no Dreiser today, or anyone resembling him—not even a Truman Capote, who attempted to trace certain pathological tendencies in American society following a cold-blooded killing in Kansas in 1959."

If Allen has indeed made such an effort, it is a poor and unconvincing one. Little is worked out or coherent in *Match Point.* The dialogue is banal and rather primitive. Thankfully, the cast of skilled British actors was able to render a poor script and poor direction somewhat watchable, leaving the less experienced Johansson to flail about gracelessly once her vamp scenes have finished.

It is painfully obvious that certain scenes exist only for the sake of exposition. Red herrings abound. Major characters, like Tom Hewett, come and go in the film without making any particular impact. The numerous references to Dostoyevsky, Strindberg and grand opera are largely pointless. The plot hinges on coincidence to a dangerous degree and is also contrived. Why, for example, does Mrs. Hewett take such a dislike to Nola? If that's a character flaw or indicates something broader about the Hewetts, it is never followed up. The family demonstrates egalitarianism on every other occasion. Mrs. Hewett's disapproval merely serves the filmmaker's purpose of eliminating Nola from her son's life and bringing the girl back into Chris's. And what about the two comic-book policemen conducting the murder investigation? Every would-be criminal should be guaranteed in advance such a ludicrous inquiry. Nor does Chris strike one as having the qualities of a potential corporate executive. The tone of the film is consistently "off."

More importantly, Allen's superficial and accommodating view of modern society is sharply at odds with Dreiser's harsh critique. The dark, Henry Jamesian feel and Edwardian look of the film only serve to underscore the director's fantasized view of British society. The cultured, humanistic bourgeoisie, with its book-lined sitting rooms, personified by the Hewetts, hardly existed for Henry James and certainly does not exist today. Reality is turned upside down by Allen, who creates a world in which the wealthy are rather admirable specimens. (That he originally intended to set his film in the US hardly improves matters.)

It follows, therefore, that society's tops are not to blame, nor is the set of social relations. The fault lies with the bit-player who crudely and opportunistically wants to grab something for himself. Indeed, the Hewetts could never imagine anything as perfidious as Chris's crime. It is, in fact, their openness, their willingness to invest blindly in the newcomer that he uses to his advantage.

The film aims its barbs at an amoral ambition that leaves victims in its wake. But even then, does it disapprove entirely? Speaking to the ghosts produced by his deed, Chris says: "The innocent are sometimes slain to make way for grander schemes. You were collateral damage." We are supposed to disapprove, but the film is thoroughly muddled on how it views Chris's depravity, with its misplaced and lazy emphasis on chance. It leaves the door open for the "make way for grander schemes" argument.

And why not? The manner in which the Hewetts are portrayed makes it entirely legitimate that Chris should want to be among them. They have an elegant, intelligent lifestyle as opera aficionados and patrons of the arts.

In their effusive praise for the film, a section of the critics have invoked Dreiser's *American Tragedy* as the source material for *Match Point.* This is an unjustified slight against the great novel, which is a scathing indictment of a social mechanism that encourages dreams only to mercilessly use and destroy those who attempt to pursue them. (It is worth noting, however, that the sudden re-emergence of Dreiser, a "dead dog" in fashionable circles in recent decades, as a point of reference in relation to a number of films and social episodes has some objective importance.)

Unlike Allen, Dreiser demonstrates that his protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, should not *want* to be part of a cruel and exploitive elite. Clyde is ground to a pulp by a social order that implants and nurtures in him hopes and aspirations that inevitably lead to his physical and psychic demise. Whereas Clyde is seeking to attain a world that does not exist, or is far more poisoned and dangerous than he imagines, Chris is pursuing one that *does* and it's simply "bad luck" for the pregnant girlfriend.

Allen goes only halfway, which misses the point entirely: he makes the dream real and desirable. Wishing the best for Chris entails hopes that he will become more committed to the kindly Chloe for all the attendant benefits. While Allen's character is simply on the make and knows it, the tragedy of Dreiser's Clyde is that he truly has swallowed the American dream, he believes wholeheartedly in his illusory and hopeless quest.

In *Match Point*, wealth and privilege seem to generate beneficial by-products. Allen paints a glowing picture of the wealthy at a time when the American and British ruling strata, philistine to the core, are engaged in stealing, looting and criminality on a massive scale!

On the other hand, *American Tragedy* takes great pains to condemn the ruling class by exposing factory conditions, the wretchedness of poverty, the carelessness and criminal instincts and behavior of the upper echelons.

Allen is working in the opposite direction. Certain things, such as envy of the rich, are momentarily hit upon, but nothing is made of them. Conversely, Dreiser draws his characters as products of social and historical events and forces. Even the minutiae of their existence is determined by inner historical laws that he treats seriously, not haphazardly like Allen. What does luck have to do with Dreiser's work?

In *American Tragedy*, even the accidental element of the murder reflects determinism at work. Dreiser is always at pains to expose the social forces in operation, carefully unearthing the conditioning that underlay Clyde's actions.

Allen's vulgar elevation of luck into a philosophical system is the sign of an intellectual impasse. Given the enormous ideological challenges that face the population today and the desperate need to raise its consciousness, one can only express disdain for the filmmaker's comments on the question: "The movie expresses my philosophy to a T. I've always been a huge believer in luck, I think that people hate to admit the enormous part that luck plays in life because it means that much of life is out of your control. You're always running into people who say, 'I make my own luck.' And hard work, of course, is important. But in the end you have to have luck, in your relationships, in your career, with your health, and a million different ways that render all the search and hard work and practicing and praying and anything else you care to do to in some way influence your life—render it slightly meaningless. That's always been a great philosophy of mine."

This is nothing but a throwing of one's hands in the air—an admission by the director that he does not have a clue about modern society. At age 70, despite all his social and personal experiences, Allen has concluded that one cannot make sense of the world—that it is too overwhelming. Behind the talk about chance lies a thinly veiled pessimism and defeatedness, which Allen expressed in his remarks to *film.guardian.co.uk*: "Without any question, I think life is tragic. There are oases of comedy within it. But, when the day is done and it's all over, the news is bad. We come to an unpleasant end."

In reviewing Allen's 2005 film, *Melinda and Melinda*, David Walsh wrote: "The Allen persona [comic] 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."

When Allen made *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, probably his finest film, in 1989, he was a different artist. Not a great work, but done with some real feeling, that film concerns a well-to-do ophthalmologist who has his mistress murdered when she threatens his comfortable existence. Obviously responding to the Reagan years and their celebration of wealth and ruthlessness, Allen had a useful premonition about the corruption and criminality that were to saturate upper middle class layers in America in the 1990s. In protesting against this emerging situation, Allen insightfully drew his characters with a high level of social determinism. They are also *concretely and urgently* drawn.

In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen even makes a certain political point about the implications of the Reaganite reaction, inserting a clip of Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in the final sequence. The actions of his central character (and, by implication, Mussolini) are contrasted with the words of the fictional liberal-humanist Professor Louis Levy: "We're all faced throughout our lives with agonizing decisions, moral choices. Some are on a grand scale, most of these choices are on lesser points. But we define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are, in fact, the sum total of our choices."

Today, when the "crimes" of the upper echelons of society have reached new heights, Allen paints these layers in a generally positive light. How is this to be explained?

During the 1990s. Allen lost his social and artistic bearings. He has not regained them, contrary to the wishful thinking of some of the critics.