

Woody Allen scores again

By Michael Giltz

Woody Allen's latest movie is unquestionably a "Woody Allen" film, for it's filled with pithy one-liners, top-notch actors and New York locales. But *Hannah And Her Sisters* is not just for Woody Allen fans, it's for everyone. Why? Because he has subtly suffused his story with warmth and humor that is both comforting and profound.

The plot is rich and varied. The basic story line involves Elliot (Michael Caine), who is married to Hannah (Mia Farrow) but has fallen in love with her sister, Lee (Barbara Hershey). Lee lives with Frederick (Max Von Sydow), but "it hasn't been sexual for many years." She returns Elliot's affections but can't bear the thought of being responsible for ruining Hannah's marriage.

Flitting in and out of the action is Holly (Diane Wiest), Hannah's other sister who comes across as sort of a female version of Woody Allen. She's neurotic, compulsive, constantly losing out in auditions and unlucky in love.

All of their lives revolve around Hannah, a person who does everything she can for everyone except open up. "I have tremendous needs," she says sullenly at one point, but no one can see them. To the others, Hannah's well-meaning love feels like charity because she never seems to need any in return.

The heart and soul of the film lies with Mickey (Woody Allen), Hannah's ex-husband. Mickey is a hypochondriac who suddenly finds himself face to face with the fact that he might have a brain tumor.

Shaken by the idea that his greatest fears might come to pass, Mickey feels the urge to do something dramatic, so he quits his job and goes in search of the meaning of life. Mickey explores everything from religion to philosophy to the Marx Brothers and he comes up with some wonderful answers to the age-old questions about life, death, and what comes in-between.

Hanna is a surprisingly literary film. Like Chekhov and Taylor, Allen manages to present every major character's point of view. As



a result, the screen bursts with complex and involving people.

The cast is certainly up to the task. Michael Caine, who's been foundering lately in such ill-conceived movies as *Blame It On Rio*, gives his best performance in years. Mia Farrow is equally luminous as Hannah and Diane Wiest gives a wonderfully manic, eccentric and endearing performance as Holly. Every single person on the screen is terrific, for Allen has filled even minor roles with heavyweights like Sam Waterston and Carrie Fisher.

The story is framed by Thanksgiving dinners, which is fitting, for *Hannah* is a life-affirming celebration. It is wise, witty, wonderful and, above all, sweet. Yes, sweet. Woody Allen has found happiness and it is cause for rejoicing.

Woody Allen is the only major American film director to follow the French theory of film-making by stamping his work with his unique personality and vision.

Arriving to movies by way of stand-up comedy, Allen's early work was filled with gags and zany satire, exemplified by *Bananas* and *Take The Money And Run*. He reached a peak in 1977 with *Annie*

Hall, the wistful romantic comedy that won an Oscar for best picture.

Despite his critical and commercial success, Allen was unsatisfied. Though he knew *Annie Hall* was entertaining and well-made, he wanted to make deeper and more meaningful films. So, he made a complete about-face by abandoning comedy for serious drama.

This period of his career includes the stark *Interiors* and the unabashedly romantic *Manhattan*. He foundered twice here, first with the annoying and self-indulgent *Stardust Memories* and secondly with the inconsistent *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*.

But the result is that Allen has opened up new creative possibilities and can now make films with richer and more varied subtexts. The 1980s have seen his most inventive, freewheeling and consistent work yet. First came the technically brilliant *Zelig*, then the nostalgic *Broadway Danny Rose*, and, most recently, the bittersweet masterpiece, *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*.

With *Hannah And Her Sisters*, Allen seems to have reached a new peak. After twenty years of writing and directing, he continues to grow and change at a tremendous rate.