

# Entertainment Outlook

## Woody Allen's new film is a mixed bag

### FILMETER



ROBERT DIMATTEO

In Movie Theaters

**CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS (R)** Once again, the screen is black with plain white letters. A long, off-beat list of actors' names flashes by, including the omnipresent Mia Farrow. There's a vintage American popular song on the soundtrack. For a second, you may wonder: Which Woody Allen movie is this? (They all begin this way.)

Later, as the characters square off in classy aphorisms and wisecracks, and the familiar polarities (art vs. life, comedy vs. seriousness) pile up, that reaction may change to: Didn't Woody Allen already make this movie? Didn't we come out of "Manhattan" and "Hannah and Her Sisters" knowing that, yes, life is worth living, even if there are no absolutes? Enough people are calling this film a masterpiece that a little grousing is in order.

At the movie's center is a dialectic embodied by two contrasting characters. There's the "happily married," highly esteemed ophthalmologist (Martin Landau) whose girlfriend (a strident Anjelica Huston) has threatened to expose him as an embezzler and philanderer. Then there's the uncompromising documentary filmmaker played by Allen, who can't abide the fact that his slick TV producer brother-in-law (Alan Alda, in lively form) gets all the attention — and maybe even the girl (Mia Farrow).

The movie is another Allen pastiche of philosophy, romance and I-Love-New York local color, with one new element — an act of murder is committed by one of the characters. This act is so outside the normal frame of



WOODY ALLEN plays Cliff Stern, a less-than-successful director of documentary films who falls for Mia Farrow in "Crimes and Misdemeanors."

Allen's films that it inadvertently makes the viewer realize how narrowly genteel the world of Allen's characters has always been.

Admittedly, "Crimes and Misdemeanors" is smooth and enjoyable, and certainly better than most movies these days. But it pinpoints Allen's weakness as a maker of serious movies — his tendency to state his themes in lofty and schematic terms, rather than working them out dramatically through his characters' actions. Allen has developed a distinctive mixed-mood form, but he seems to have reached its limits in this comedy-drama.

Despite all the talk about Allen's finally joining his light and dark sides in one movie, that's exactly what he

doesn't do here. Trying to comprehend murder and guilt, Allen gets in over his head, and then settles for a glib confrontation between the ophthalmologist and the filmmaker at climax time. Admirable as the film's ambitions are, I'd trade all of its profundity for one single scene in the flawed 1988 Allen film, "Another Woman," where Gena Rowlands and her husband meet old friend Sandy Dennis on the street, and, over drinks, Dennis really lays into Rowlands. That scene shows what Allen can do when he's thinking both seriously and

freshly. GRADE: ★★★

New Home Video

**LITTLE DORRIT (G)** Warner. Christine Edzard's brilliant, demanding rendering of the Charles Dickens novel tells one story from the point of view of two different characters. This dual perspective doesn't quite justify the movie's six-hour length, but there are splendid compensations, including one of the great Alec Guinness' greatest performances. On video, you can watch the movie at your leisure. GRADE: ★★★½

(Film grading: ★★★★★ — excellent, ★★★★★ — good, ★★ — fair, ★ — poor)

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### OUR LANGUAGE

by Jeffrey McQuain

Incipency ("in-SIP-ee-en-see") refers to the beginning or earliest stage. If you want to enlarge your vocabulary, try incipency for starters.

Raze tears down or destroys. Pronounce raze like raise, but don't confuse these verbs: raise comes first alphabetically, and you must raise before you raze.

Q. My teacher said to avoid using a cliché when I can. How do I do that?

A. A cliché is any expression that's become trite from overuse. (It's pronounced "klee-SHAY" and usually written with an acute accent over the e.) To avoid using a cliché, think of a new or fresh way to express the same thought. You can bet your bottom dollar that there's a better expression to use than the tired cliché bet your bottom dollar.

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