

Woody Allen as director, actor

By Julia Spencer

Writer-director Woody Allen's latest film, *Alice*, is a delightfully whimsical fantasy which makes some very real if not completely original points about relationships, values and mid-life crises.

Alice (Mia Farrow) is a pampered and cosseted New York wife who spends her days shopping, gossiping, going to the beauty parlor and planning dinner parties. Lately her back has been hurting, but none of her doctors, masseurs or exercise regimens can remedy the problem. Her friends, her housekeeper and even her usually inattentive husband (William Hurt), however, recommend a certain Dr. Yang, who hypnotizes the reluctant and skeptical Alice with a spinning spiral pattern mounted on a fan motor.

Under hypnosis, she confesses her dissatisfaction with her 16-year marriage, expresses a desire to write and admits an attraction for Joe, a tenor sax player (Joe Mantegna) she has met while picking up her kids from school. Dr. Yang, an abrupt, if perceptive old man, administers some herbs which give the usually timid Alice a new-found boldness.

Despite her overwhelming Catholic guilt, she accosts Joe in a conspiratorial whisper, dazzling him with her suddenly acquired jazz expertise, while a tango plays in the background. She even asks him to meet her by the penguin house at the zoo. Once the herbs wear off and the tango fades from the soundtrack, however, her painful shyness and guilt return, and she can't bring herself to keep the date.

On a return visit to Dr. Yang she is given new herbs, which bring back the ghost of an old flame (Alec Baldwin). Still others render her invisible, allowing her to spy on Joe, her friends and her husband. Lost in a spiral of accumulated guilt and indecision, she vacillates between her insensitive husband and Joe, and between the easy life and her desire to help others and lead her own, more fulfilling life.

This indecision is wonderfully underscored by the many images of spirals, by the way the camera pans back and forth between characters and by the music of the tango, which as a friend pointed out, is a dance in which the partners move back and forth. In spite of the simplicity of the mid-life crisis theme, the film itself is quite complex; its many motifs and striking images have much to offer the repeat viewer.

Mia Farrow, in one of her best roles here, is properly shy and wishy-washy as Alice, and has expert support from Hurt, Mantegna, Baldwin, Cybill Shepherd (as her successful friend Nancy Brill) and Julie Kavner (in a bit part). Allen, who is strictly behind the camera here, manages some clever and well-aimed jabs at the "ladies who lunch" and at TV movies, and gently satirizes the stereotypical Asian guru with Dr. Yang's matter-of-fact char-



film

acter. This movie will probably not last long here, so run and see it before it leaves.

So what does *Scenes From a Mall* have in common with *Alice* other than Woody Allen, who stars in this "dramedy" along with Bette Midler? At first glance, one might say, "not much." *Scenes* is set in a mall in L.A., is more or less realistic, and has only two main characters. After seeing both of these movies this weekend, however, similarities began to pop up. Both of these films are about people who, after 16 years of marriage, are going through mid-life crises, and are trying to reassess their relationships and their goals.

Allen (sans black nerd glasses) and Midler, are Nick and Deborah, a wealthy professional couple (he's a lawyer, she's a psychologist), who are celebrating their 16th wedding anniversary. A trip to the mall to pick up some sushi for a dinner party sets the stage for their reminiscences and for the revelations which call into question the likelihood of further anniversaries.

Nick, you see, picks this day to admit to his wife that he has had an affair — well, several affairs. He

wants to be forgiven and is eager to start again with a clean slate. Deborah, on the other hand, wants to call it quits, despite the fact that she has just written a book called "I Do, I Do, I Do; Recommitting Yourself to Marriage in the Age of Divorce." After she hurls the sushi at him and stomps off, he attempts to appease her by offering to be her divorce lawyer. Trying to divide up their property over margaritas at a Mexican restaurant, the whole idea seems ridiculous, and a passionate interlude during a showing of "Salaam Bombay" appears to have solved the problem. That is until Deborah has something to confess...

Director Paul Mazursky ("Down and Out in Beverly Hills") does a marvelous job of using the myriad public spaces of the mall as a backdrop for the couple's quarreling and making up. A pesky mime (Bill Irwin of Broadway's "Largely New York") follows them around, symbolizing the couple's failure to communicate and cashing in on their irritability.

This couple's indecision, as they oscillate between renewing their commitment and giving up, is much

like Alice's, and the spiral mall parking ramp mirrors the spiral stairs and hypnotic pattern Alice is caught in.

Alice was the deeper, and I thought superior film; its considerable humor, while partly derived from fantastical situations, was based mostly on the natural comedy of human nature. *Scenes*, while having its serious moments, is lighter and more farcical in nature, and uses more physical humor to get laughs.

Both films say essentially that money can't buy you love and that all the money and possessions in the world won't hold a relationship together. Not anything new, exactly, but perhaps these films are signaling the end of the age of yuppie materialism.

Film buffs will, of course, appreciate Allen's work in both of these films, but they are very much mainstream, and should appeal to any viewer.

These aren't Allen's greatest works, but, like his best films, are perceptive, funny and human. *Alice* is showing at Post Oak 3; *Scenes* is showing at Shulman 6.

on the cover

Christopher Smith, of Tomball, watches a battle between two combatants at a Society for Creative Anachronism event Saturday in Huntsville.

Photo by Phelan M. Ebenhack



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