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OPERA, LOVE, AND DEATH

Match Point. Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Scarlett Johansson, and Emily Mortimer star in a film written and directed by Woody Allen.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Word on the street and in critical chatter channels has it that Match Point, an uncommonly quiet chilling suspense number, is Woody Allen's finest work in many years. And so it is: Allen has long been trying to find his creative way, making films that, while interesting, have been flawed affairs by comparison with the auteur's best pre-Soon-Yi work. That list runs through last year's gamely experimental but flat Melinda and Melinda, a fine idea desperately seeking a fine realization.

Maybe some sharp left turns from his usual venues were in order. Although his new film — file under non-comedic Woody Allen — essentially reworks themes of love, death, guilt, and moral queasiness from Crimes and Misdemeanors, Match Point is distinctive on many fronts, including a flight from his beloved Manhattan, where most of his films have taken place.

Here, the setting is London, mostly in the posh, shallow narcissism of the über-wealthy. At the story's turbulent center is the nefarious relationship between social-climbing former tennis pro Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, in a stunning, complex performance) and a beautiful, aspiring American actress in London (Scarlett Johansson, to die — and kill — for). Each is a romantic interest of siblings in the upper class Hewett family, to which they aspire membership by marriage.

The lust-fated pair meets over a ping pong table (tennis is the film's prevailing metaphor), exchanging the loaded greeting, "What did I walk into?" What they've walked and writhed into is a scenario involving secret love and a tangled mess where murderous thoughts lurk. Wilton reads Dostoevsky and Strindberg, nods to the referential backdrop of Allen's fiendishly clever tale of amorality and turgid fate.

Match Point is blessedly free of the usual surrogate Allen character, and English accents run thick, including an impressive model by Brian Cox as the Hewett family patriarch. (In one scene with a Cockney-tongued bobby, Allen seems to extend the action just to savor his exotic accent.) Rabid Allen fans will also note a telling shift in musical landscape, as well: Instead of Great American Songbook and pre-bebop jazz material, we get opera tickling the air, including generous stretches of scratchy-sounding Enrico Caruso tracks. If Allen's comic ventures have been akin to a new, urbane Opera Buffa, he drops the Buffa here, plunging into such clearly operatic themes — surging and

clashing passions, secret narrative passageways, love, and death. Film noir is also part of the theatrical pedigree here: The Bacall-voiced Johansson is the femme fatale of the year.

Maybe Allen should get out of town more often.