



Hobie (Will Ferrell) likes neighbor Melinda (Radha Mitchell).

FOX SEARCHLIGHT, 2005

Alternate Universe

Woody Allen's magical lantern show

MELINDA AND MELINDA: Written and directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Letty Aronson. Co-producer, Helen Robin. Executive producers, Stephen Tenenbaum, Jack Rollins, Charles H. Joffe. Cinematography, Vilmos Zsigmond. Production design, Santo Loquasto. Editor, Alisa Lepselter. Costumes, Judy Ruskin Howell. Casting, Juliet Taylor. Starring Radha Mitchell, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Will Ferrell, Jonny Lee Miller, Amanda Peet, Chloë Sevigny and Wallace Shawn. Fox Searchlight, 2005. PG-13. 99 minutes.

This must have been a simple pitch for an ensemble comedy by Woody Allen: Two writers having dinner at a trendy French bistro hear the same story. One

(Max, played by Larry Pine) says it would make a great comedy. The other (Sy, played by Wallace Shawn) says, no, it's tragic. Show me, the storyteller (Stephanie Roth Haverle) says. And so the story begins.

I should say the stories begin, because while they start as parallels, in time the stories both diverge and seem to intertwine. Or maybe enough of the surface is the same in both stories that I couldn't tell residences apart after awhile. Both are set in tastefully appointed Manhattan apartments peopled by

well coiffed, slender individuals with fabulous occupations. Comedy and tragedy are close here, but money and/or status are givens. Maybe that's the point and the reason Melinda feels left out.

In both stories, Radha Mitchell (*Phone Booth*, *Finding Neverland*) plays a woman named Melinda, who bursts unannounced into a dinner party. Melinda's gone through a rough patch lately, and she stirs things up when she joins the gathering in progress. Melinda tells slightly different versions of her recent troubles in each story.

In the dramatic story, the dinner is being given by Melinda's old college friend, Laurel (Chloë Sevigny), and her husband, Lee (Jonny Lee Miller) in their SoHo loft. A pianist, Laurel grew up on the city's Upper East Side, while Lee's an aspiring actor. In the comedy storyline, the dinner party is hosted in an Upper East Side townhouse by an easy-going actor named Hobie (Will Ferrell) and his ambitious wife, Susan (Amanda Peet), an independent film director. In this story, Melinda is the dizzy blonde neighbor who intrudes on their party.

One of Laurel and Lee's guests is another pal of Melinda's from school, Cassie (Brooke Smith). Laurel and Cassie set up a date for Melinda with Greg (Josh Brolin), a rich, stable dentist who owns a country home in the Hamptons. But Greg bores Melinda. She's attracted to the piano player, Ellis (Chiwetel Ejiofor *Love Actually*, *Dirty Pretty Things*). He's a serious composer who lives in a skylit loft.

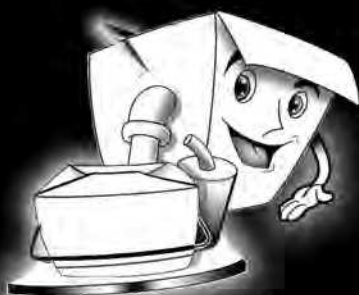
With most of the ensemble assembled, Allen seems to have a really good time weaving the various strands of story one and story two together. As for the dialogue, sometimes it's stiff and sounds like vintage Allen. Other times the actors make the lines sound natural. But Ferrell's line readings out-Woody the man himself. They are priceless.

Good cast, great production values and only a few plot confusions add to this exercise in story. Here story is that all-important tale we tell ourselves and others about our lives — tragic, comic, half-full or half-empty glass — the choice is ours.

Melinda and Melinda opens Friday, April 14 at the Bijou. Highly recommended. **EW**

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