

Woody Allen's *Crisis in Six Scenes* and the current cultural vacuum

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Woody Allen

Woody Allen's *Crisis in Six Scenes* is a six-episode television miniseries commissioned by Amazon Studios. Purporting to be a comedic commentary on the era of tumultuous protest against the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the series premiered in September and is available on Amazon in the US, the UK and Germany.

This is Allen's first venture into television since writing comedy sketches in the early days of his career. Running at 142 minutes, *Crisis in Six Scenes* is weak and misguided. It is neither funny nor insightful, and crudely trivializes a significant time in American history.

The series is introduced by a brief newsreel montage of political protests and upheavals—"American society is brought to the verge of revolution." After this momentary glimpse of reality, *Crisis in Six Scenes* proceeds to its facetious storyline. Allen is Sidney Munsinger, a writer and twitchy hypochondriac living in an upscale New York City suburb with his wife, Kay (Elaine May), a marriage counselor who works out of her home. She also spends her time hosting a book club for the town's elderly women.

After he gives up writing novels that were allegedly J.D. Salingeresque, Sidney pitches a family sitcom about Neanderthals to stone-faced television executives. He talks business in a restaurant where he is convinced the napkins and tacos are bugged. He also complains about ailments diagnosed as "chapped lips and not the flesh-eating virus."

Living with the Munsingers is the son of a friend, Allen Brockman (John Magaro), who is attending NYU in the hopes of making his mark in the financial industry. John is engaged to Ellie (Rachel Brosnahan), and their union is on the fast track to bourgeois success.

Then—in a faint echo of Philip Roth's *American*

Pastoral—the idyllic household is upended when gun-toting Lennie (Miley Cyrus) makes her appearance. She is a member of the "Constitutional Liberation Army" and a wanted fugitive. (Lennie: "One man's fugitive is another man's liberation fighter.")

Far more living, breathing caricature than human being, Lennie is a terrorist and font of meaningless radical phrases. She luxuriates at the Munsingers, hiding in plain sight, while preparing her escape to Cuba. She is all too eager to explain that her sexual partners have been black and Jewish, among others, so as to absorb a variety of anti-establishment qualities. She is also the reason Sidney can deliver lines like "Do all revolutionaries eat so much? Did Lenin eat so much?" And that he can avoid protesting the war because he's "allergic to tear gas."

As Kay, along with her book club, becomes more and more entranced by Lennie's semi-Maoist philosophy, Sidney continues the coarseness: "You shouldn't be thinking radical politics," he tells Kay, "you should be thinking hip replacement." Allen Brockman too falls under Lennie's sway, pondering whether he can make a living in Cuba or Algeria.

Any mention of events such as the "massacre of civilians in Vietnam" or Japanese-American internment camps (wrong decade) is reduced to the form of throw-away lines. In the end, Sidney, perhaps letting the cat out of Allen's bag, says, "Beware of radicals, no matter how just their cause."

A few points need to be made. This is an awful series, as nearly every commentator agrees, and something of a black eye for Amazon. According to *Business Insider*, *Crisis in Six Scenes* "is tied for the worst-reviewed show in Amazon's history."

There is no pleasure to be had in pointing out (one

more time!) that Allen, who once represented something amusing and, bound up with that, something of a thorn in the side of conventional wisdom, long ago ran out of things to say. All is stale here—at best. If the reader cares to look at the trailer for the series, he or she will gain some insight into its general flat and slipshod quality. And this is the trailer, which supposedly gathers up the most humorous and pointed moments!

If one were to take *Crisis in Six Scenes* halfway seriously, one might have to suggest, unpleasantly, that Allen—having momentarily left his cocoon of self-absorption—is reacting unfavorably to the present circumstances with his warning about the danger of radicalism.

Beyond that, the fact that Amazon commissioned this project and that leading actors and performers evidently still consider Allen—on the basis of work done three or four decades ago—a “cutting edge” artistic figure, someone whose work brings forth considerable “psychological realism,” speaks to the enormity of the present cultural vacuum. In that sense, the unfortunate character of *Crisis in Six Scenes* is not primarily Allen’s responsibility. First of all, in a more favorable cultural climate, he himself might have come back to life. In any event, if he did not, his efforts would be safely ignored.

Of course, Allen does bear some responsibility, along with many, many upper middle-class erstwhile liberals or radicals like him, for his present overwhelming self-involvement. What is one to make of his boast in a September interview with *Vanity Fair* (did the appropriateness of the venue occur to anyone?) that the “60s were a nice time for me. I was playing in a Broadway show. I had a big romance with Diane Keaton, and I started to emerge as a filmmaker. It was a very nice time in my life. I have a nice memory of it, but I’m sure it wasn’t as nice as I remember”?

Millions dead in Vietnam, a spate of political assassinations in the US, FBI-police spying and repression against political opponents, blood in the streets of American cities, a series of bitter strikes against giant corporations...yes, in general, a good time was had by all.

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