



A New York Couple

by Richard Brookhiser

A drink in the lounge of the Algonquin Hotel was the setup for the best birthday present I ever got my wife.

I am terrible at presents, especially birthday presents. Christmas comes the same day every year, that I can plan for. But the effort of remembering any birthday except my own, combined with the burden of picking an appropriate present, makes the birthdays of my loved ones botched and dreaded occasions. I have forgotten my wife's altogether. Other years, remembering at the last minute, I've grabbed presents that were cheesy or drab. One year I repeated the gift I'd gotten her the last Christmas. My wife, if she chose, could ponder a long ledger of my failings.

The bright shining mark in the credit column was the year I took her for an evening drink at the Algonquin. My wife was tired from work; so far that day, there had been no present, not even a card, so she was cranky, too. I said, as if to humor her, "Let's go out for a drink." She demurred; I insisted. Reluctantly, she allowed herself to be persuaded. We took a cab to 44th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, and settled in for a drink. In time, her mood improved to the point where she might have admitted that I wasn't such a bad catch after all. "Wouldn't it be fun to stay here some night?" I offered. She agreed. Whereupon, I played my lifetime ace of trumps, by tossing a room key on the table before her. In the room to which the key belonged, I had pre-positioned a dozen roses, a box of

Richard Brookhiser is a senior editor of National Review and a columnist for the New York Observer.

chocolates, and a bottle of champagne. I'd even remembered her hairdryer. The hairdryer was to show the maid, if she was curious, that we were really married. Mistresses only get frills. Wives need the basics, too.

The reason I picked the Algonquin for my venue is that it's one of the few hotels in New York, or anywhere, with a lounge attractive enough to have served as bait.

They recently finished renovating the Algonquin. The Blue Bar, a little nook that used to be on your right as you walked in the front door, has



been moved and enlarged. The old Blue Bar was small, snug, dark, perfect for the kind of intimate drinking that fuels male camaraderie and pick-ups. There you could bare your soul or pat a woman's knee. For general conversation or romancing with a dash of gentility, you went to the lounge, which looks

untouched. If you're the kind of person who's always being blackballed, it is the next best thing to a club. Dark wood trim makes the high-ceilinged room cozy; so do the columns, more numerous than seem structurally necessary, which split the space into pools of privacy. Some of the chairs have fringe; so do some of the lampshades. They look as if they should be threadbare, but they aren't. Each table has a bell fastened to the top, for summoning a waiter, though I've never rung: when the after-theater crowd is here, it couldn't be heard, and at quieter times you'd feel as if you were disturbing the peace. When a waiter does pass by, the *arrière-garde* atmosphere of the place practically requires you to order a cocktail, preferably a martini. Think of its presence before you as part of the dress code.

The Algonquin has a literary reputation—better say, a literary past. The Algonquin Round Table met there, and the *New Yorker* used to be located in a building that had a rear exit across the street. James Thurber wrote that Harold Ross's

famous and busy friends of the Algonquin Round Table and its fringes took his fond enterprise lightly. . . . A few of them helped now and then, with left hand, and tongue in cheek. "The part-time help of wits is no better than the full-time help of half-wits,"

Herman Mankiewicz is reported to have said at the time. When I reminded Ross of this line years later, all he said was, "God knows I had both kinds."

Time has adjusted that balance: I can't recall offhand any members of the Round Table, except Dorothy Parker, but the *New Yorker* is still with us; though I

wonder if its editors ever made the pilgrimage here after they moved to new digs.

When you tire of the past, make the pilgrimage across the street for the future, to the Royalton.

Until quite recently, the Royalton was a rat's nest. Literally—I know two people who heard vermin rustling in the walls when they stayed there. Then the place was turned over to the Belgian designer Philippe Starck for a makeover. The new improved Royalton opened in October 1988.

The next time someone tells you the eighties were years of pointless greed, point to this place. Yes, style is not everything, and a lot of people in the eighties spent too much of their time on it, but in periods of high style there is at least a chance that some of the effusions of the moment will be genuinely stylish. This is one of them.

Starck achieved it by maniacal attention to detail. The details begin before the moment you enter the door. The door is flanked by two solemn pillars, like a bank's or a library's; the door itself is dark, solid wood, as if it belonged to a speakeasy. Inside, the lobby is long and narrow, like a corridor in an ocean liner. Every decoration, from bannisters to bud vases, has the shape of a rounded point, or a pointed curve. Easter lilies preen on the walls like vogueurs. The runner is imperial blue, with a border of white, possibly animate, figures. The bar at the back has an undulating footrest and a blue neon stripe running down the stone top. At one end is a green, bottom-lit basin full of marbles. The bellboys wear black shirts and jackets, and of course no neckties. They all hope to be in *Playbill*. Drink of choice? White wine. The buzz here comes from the furniture.

Since this is a hotel, most of the guests are the opposite of *soigné*. But many of the young women wear slips as blouses; the year before, they were at the Coffee Shop in tube dresses. I once saw three buds chaperoned by a young man wearing a tail coat, an earring, and a ponytail. There was a rumor that someone on the staff, later reprimanded, once asked some Hasids who had dropped in from the nearby diamond district to leave because their eighteenth-century Polish garb clashed with

the decor. At least they would have been wearing the right colors. The men's room urinal is worth a detour. If you're a woman, get your escort to guard the door for you so you can look.

I have checked my wife into the Royalton, too, to celebrate an anniversary. I couldn't make the trick a surprise the second time around, but the staff compensated by writing HAPPY ANNIVERSARY in chocolate around the rim of her dessert plate. The sink in our

room was conical, and the pencil on the nightstand had a black eraser. Compared to our night at the Algonquin, it was like visiting a not-parallel universe. Only we were the same—and New York, which can supply two perfect-of-their kind, but completely different, rentable stage sets, across the street from each other, like bookends. The ability to do so may not be as important as schools without criminals or subways without beggars, but it is something. □

THE TALKIES



Family Value

by James Bowman

Hollywood always looks its worst at election time. This year we have to endure not only the nauseating spectacle of rich movie stars congratulating themselves for rallying around the people's party and ludicrous caricatures of the right in films like *Bob Roberts* or *Sneakers*, but also shrill, self-righteous cries of outrage from those whose "values" have been criticized by the Vice President.

Interestingly, it is only black films, like *South Central* by Steve Anderson, that are allowed to stand out from the "cultural elite" and stand up for traditional families and their values with a completely straight face. I hope you will not think me uncharitable for thinking so, but I guess that this is liberal condescension. Anderson's film effectively illustrates Dan Quayle's thesis about absent fathers, but it can scarcely expect to interrupt the general mirth over Murphy Brown's clever rejoinders to Quayle—because it's about black people and so doesn't count.

James Bowman, *The American Spectator's* movie critic, is the American editor of the Times Literary Supplement.

Like so many others of its genre, *South Central* suffers from being too preachy. It is on the right side, but its being on any side robs it of subtlety and a needful artistic detachment. Woody Allen, on the other hand, is on the wrong side (we have no less an authority than Newt Gingrich to tell us so), but his new picture, *Husbands and Wives*, is the nearest thing he has had to an artistic success in years. Allen plays Gabe Roth, a creative writing teacher at Columbia, who *refuses* an affair with a young girl of 21 (Juliette Lewis)—because, as he says, he knows how it is going to come out.

Allen, it seems, is wiser in art than he is in life. He is wiser, too, than his friend Jack (Sydney Pollock), a man who is, like most people in love, too thick-witted and self-deceiving to see how his infatuation with an airheaded aerobics instructor (Lysette Anthony) is going to come out. Yet it is precisely because Jack cannot see that far ahead that his marriage to Sally (Judy Davis) is salvageable. Just as the infatuation that he thought was love could evaporate, so the love that he thought dead could be revived. Sort of. →