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A TURNING POINT FOR WOODY

“... In clinging to their notions of what a Woody Allen film should be, critics haven't made an effort to confront *Interiors* on its own terms ...”

A lot of people won't forgive an artist for trying to grow. Woody Allen must have realized the risk he was taking when he decided to make *Interiors*. The reactions have been predictable: critics don't want to give up their Woody Allen, the satirist who made fun of every form of pretension. In clinging to their rigid notions of what a Woody Allen film should be, they haven't made the effort to confront *Interiors* on its own terms.

Allen may have compounded his problems by announcing that there wouldn't be a single joke in the movie. It's true that there are no gag lines, but the film is certainly not without humor. It takes a little while for this humor to surface. The opening shots of a deserted house on a bleak Long Island seashore evoke the world of Ingmar Bergman (the handsome cinematography is by Gordon Willis), and people are so completely primed for a solemn experience that they miss the flashes of Allen's characteristic wit.

Interiors centers around a cultivated New York family and three competitive sisters: Renata (Diane Keaton), a respected poetess; Flynn (Kristin Griffith), a moderately successful TV actress; and Joey (especially well played by Marybeth Hurt), an unhappy girl with the temperament and intelligence of an artist but with no particular artistic talent. Allen treats their anguish and their aspirations seriously, but he keeps his distance; he is incapable of identifying wholeheartedly with any one character. The satiric edge of his comedies is implicit in the complex, hard-edged portrait of a group of gifted, maddening, self-indulgent people.

To take just one example, the family matriarch, Eve (Geraldine Page), is a high-strung aesthete who's ordered her family's lives for as long as they can remember. Her reverence for art takes



the form of fanatical attention to details of interior decoration. She knows where every vase, every plant, every Kovacs lamp and Matisse print belongs; she's made a lifetime occupation of furnishing her family's homes in the most exquisite possible taste. It's impossible not to laugh at her compulsive attention to detail, and in his earlier films, Allen would have mocked her more ruthlessly. This time he cuts deeper; he sympathetically points out the disorientation she feels when her husband leaves her and her orderly life begins to crumble. The portrait of Eve is a masterful balancing act, a blend of irony and compassion. Geraldine Page's searing performance keeps us in a tense, ambivalent relationship with the character throughout the movie.

One startling moment epitomizes the tone of the film. When Eve attempts to commit suicide by turning on the gas oven, she first seals all the windows in her apartment with black masking tape. Unfortunately, the tape runs out just before she completes her grisly task, and she has to finish the job with a tiny roll of white adhesive tape. The scene itself recalls Liv Ullmann's suicide attempt in *Face to Face*, but the subtle, subversive,

macabre joke about the white adhesive tape is a touch that Bergman would never have dreamed of including. The moment is pure Woody Allen, a clue to his peculiar intelligence. Even in this grim scene, we can't help chuckling at the messiness of that tiny strip of white tape, which violates the perfect aesthetic symmetry that Eve envisions for her suicide. The alert, skeptical but tolerant view of human lunacy is what links Allen's comedies to this very different movie.

Allen's most inspired invention is the character of Pearl (Maureen Stapleton), the widow whom the girls' father intends to marry once he divorces

Eve. Unlike Eve, Pearl is a hard-headed, fun-loving, carefree bourgeois woman who prefers sunbathing to gallery hopping. At first we see her as the other family members see her; she's like a fish out of water in this rarefied atmosphere, and we laugh at her vulgarity as she tells about her son who runs an art gallery—in the lobby of Caesars Palace. And yet her zest for life mocks and exposes the other characters' tortured gloom. Besides, we come to realize that she's not as shallow as she seems; her frivolous façade is a defense against the suffering that she understands all too well. Maureen Stapleton is equally brilliant in the comic scenes and in the tragic finale, when her face eloquently expresses her knowledge of the horror that she is determined to defy.

The scenes with Pearl are superb dramatic confrontations because no one is simply right or completely wrong. Unfortunately, not all of the film is quite so riveting. Some of the most promising character conflicts—the jealousy between Renata and Joey, or between Renata and her novelist husband (Richard Jordan)—are laboriously explained in literal-minded dialogue instead of being embodied in dramatic action. Some of

the dialogue is too self-conscious even for these artistic souls. Lines like "One day an enormous abyss opened up beneath our feet" and "Increasing thoughts about death just seemed to come over me" chafe. But then it has often been said that Swedish intellectuals wince at some of Bergman's heavy-handed dialogue, too; those lines about death and the abyss may seem more impressive when printed in subtitles than when spoken aloud.

Still, the occasional gaffes can be tolerated because it's such a pleasure to see an American movie about intelligent adults. *Interiors* is a flawed work, but compelling and rewarding. In extending his range, Woody Allen has also opened up new possibilities for American movies.

Today television is flooded with so many drippy family soap operas that feature filmmakers have virtually abandoned family themes. One of the refreshing things about *Interiors* is that it returns to the most elemental human arena—the web of loyalties and rivalries within a family. A mature, marvelous Swedish film, **Summer Paradise**, also scrutinizes family relationships with a sharp, skeptical eye. Adapted from a novel by Ulla Isaksson, the film marks the outstanding directorial debut of Gunnel Lindblom, who made a strong impression as an actress in several Ingmar Bergman films. Bergman served as producer on *Summer Paradise*, and it shows his influence. But Lindblom already manifests an authoritative voice of her own.

The film follows the members of a large middle class family to their summer home on an island in the Swedish archipelago. Four generations come together for the outing. The central figure is Katha, a divorced doctor in her fifties; the film surveys her relationships with her parents, as well as with her children and grandchildren. The summer holiday is an annual tradition. Although the family members have changed over the years and have lost many of their ideals, they still look forward to their summers together as a brief island of tranquility in their troubled lives; they feel refreshed and renewed after this regular return to their childhood haunts. *Summer Paradise* has a Wordsworthian feeling; it captures the seductiveness and security of familiar places with memories attached to every blade of grass.

At the same time the movie points up the poisonous selfishness and complacency that this nostalgia breeds. Families tend to be jealous of anyone who intrudes on their privileged relationships. Katha, for example, resents the two outsiders who join their holiday—her daughter's friend Ingrid and Ingrid's