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From a whisper to a scream: Allen directs his angst-ridden melodrama.

Golden Boys

BY J. HOBERMAN

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SEPTEMBER. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Released by Orion Pictures. Opening December 18.

EMPIRE OF THE SUN. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Written by Tom Stoppard, from the novel by J. G. Ballard. Produced by Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, and Frank Marshall. Released by Warner Bros.

OLD WELL. Directed by Wu Tianming. Written by Zheng Yi. Produced by Xi'an Studio. At the Asia Society, December 17.

Steven Spielberg and Woody Allen represent the twin poles of American commercial cinema. They're Mr. Mass and Mr. Class, Hollywood blockbuster and Manhattan solipsist. But the fires of ambition drive them both—they'd each in their way like to make *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Thus, in their latest outings, Spielberg's religious pulp and Allen's urbane comedy are equally subsumed by serious morality, or what's commonly taken to be grown-up good taste.

Allen's *September*, opening here Friday, is *The Sorrow and the Pity* as summer stock. The movie leaves you gasping for air—and not from a surfeit of merriment either. Its most convulsive quality

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is its claustrophobia. In a ploy blatantly suggestive of the director's first foray into celluloid solemnity, *September* is all coffee-and-cream colored interiors—taking place at extremely close quarters in a Vermont summer house where the blinds are always drawn and the autumnal light is generated by the earnest glow of the characters themselves.

September opens with a bit of offbeat surrealism—a stately dolly by a decorative (never to be used) chess set toward the beige sofa where Denholm Elliott and Dianne Wiest, by default the two most attractive figures in the film, are attempting to converse in French. But it soon dissolves into a flurry of wall-to-wall chatter. This frantic table-setting, carried on in two or three adjoining rooms, establishes arch frump Mia Farrow as the traumatized daughter of a onetime celeb (Elaine Stritch), now married to an ador-

ing physicist (Jack Warden); Elliott is Farrow's admiring neighbor, Wiest her unhappy best friend, and Sam Waterston a boarder who functions as a universal object of desire. Not only are sad-sack Farrow and angst-ridden Wiest smitten by this smug novelist manqué, brassy Stritch is trying to seduce him into ghostwriting her scandalous life story.

Divided into three neat acts, the narrative is ostentatiously anecdotal: Stritch slugs Stoly and plays backgammon, Warden and Waterston discuss the annihilation of the universe, a storm knocks out the power, occasioning much languid sitting around and a bit of abortive trysting. The couples engage in parallel gavottes of male desire and female avoidance—a mournful litany of *don'ts* providing irritating new lyrics to the assertive background of '30s show tunes. Allen's milieu is so distinctively hermetic that, even though the movie pokes only the mildest fun at the foibles of its characters, it inevitably appears as failed self-parody.

Forget about the imploding universe. Here again is the familiar galaxy of Allen types: the manipulative, domineering mother (played by Stritch as an amalgam of *Interior's* Geraldine Page and Maureen Stapleton); the neurotic, unfulfilled women, their faces tight masks of agonized ambivalence; the sensitive, predatory men, morose and self-justifying. Everyone is painfully self-conscious, making knowing references to Kurosawa and Art Tatum, oddly denatured, and doggedly self-pitying. Pathetic and squinting as a would-be photographer—the strangled blorch of her sobs more strident than even Cole Porter—Farrow dreams of some imaginary New York as though it were Chekhov's Moscow, while Wiest, who gets to squeak her way through far better scenes, is similarly hung up on Paris.

September might have been a psychodrama if Maureen O'Sullivan, Farrow's actual mother, had played Stritch's part as planned. Instead, the movie is a stultifying series of one-on-one raps. Set in a yawn-inducing miasma of guilt and unconsummated sex, it plays like unfunny Nichols and May. Allen brings his camera brutally close to his performers—for much of the film the spectator feels like a

fly on the fourth wall of a Brobdingnagian stage (a sense emphasized by Stritch's frequent references to her wrinkles and liver spots). The effect is acutely embarrassing; after a while even the screen seems to crinkle up with crow's feet. *September* is as house-proud as it is housebound; when a realtor appears with a pair of prospective buyers, you feel like getting up and selling your seat.

Is there a world outside this suffocating realm of self-absorption? Wouldn't one of these suffering creatures at least make a joke about Oliver North or flip on the radio for *All Things Considered*? The film is so programmatically antierotic that its single image of gratified desire is that of the monstrously parental Stritch and Warden briefly entangled in chaste embrace. Given a set and setting so constricted it makes Anne Beatty seem like Ethel Merman, the weirdest thing about *September* is that Farrow's trauma turns out to be a tabloid episode from *Hollywood Babylon*. (If you're expecting a lurid flashback, just forget it.) Leave it to Woody Allen to envision a vulgar showbiz scandal as the heart of darkness—our

(or his) dirty little secret—and then prissily decline to explore it. Like, what does art have to do with that? Fastidious as it is, *September* is meant to end with something like the plonk! of a single string breaking—it's a good thing Woody has more than one on his violin.