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Inside job

If, in previous Woody Allen films, a lady interior-decorator had said, petulantly, 'I should stick with my beiges and my earth tones', we would have known where we stood. Woody would have been sending her up rotten. In his new film, aptly entitled *Interiors* (Gate, Notting Hill), we are not so sure, for *Interiors*, by his own admission, is Woody's first stab at a serious film. What makes it doubly confusing is that there are genuinely, deliberately comic scenes within the overall sad structure, and many of them are aimed at pretensions in a way familiar from his gloriously funny satires.

Here, Geraldine Page is Eve, mother not of all mankind (though she gives signs of wanting to think of herself as the beginning and end of creation), but of three grown-up daughters; married to Arthur (E.G. Marshall) and living in tasteful comfort on Long Island. Miss Page cuts wonderful swathes through her character's egocentric high-mindedness, her bossiness to her daughters, her stifling suppression of warmth in the family in the interests of cultural refinement and the pursuit of the exquisite. Miss Page makes it quite clear that Eve's taste is the kind that never errs, because it takes no risks. Uncomfortably, she has to do all this with lines such as, 'Paler tones make a more subtle statement'; and although we get the point that her house is so subtly stated it is practically dead, the dialogue comes from a broader line of comic writing that will serve Allen's real interests here.

The interests are, of course, the family and what is going on in their interiors, and whether and how they are held together. Diane Keaton is Renata, a poet married to Frederick, an unsuccessful writer (Richard Jordan); a second daughter, Joey (Marybeth Hurt), a constant job-changer, is married to a radical film-maker, Mike (Sam Waterston). Nobody seems too pleased with his or her life, except quiet Arthur, until he ups and announces one morning that now everybody is grown-up and provided for, he is moving out.

Into their lives erupts Pearl (Maureen Stapleton), a gust of fresh air, not to say a force-ten gale. She is Arthur's new woman friend, and she is as different from Eve as caviar from gefilte fish. Seeking tentative links with her new family-to-be, Pearl startles them all by revealing that her brother runs an art gallery. But it proves to be in the lobby of the Caesar's Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, and it sells expensive junk. Joey dismisses her as a vulgarian, Eve turns on the gas taps and composes herself tranquilly for the great beyond (but fails to reach it), and the battle lines are drawn.

This is where the film comes, comically, and seriously, into its own. Maureen Stapleton makes a brilliant study of an ordinary woman of no pretensions, but a great deal of warmth. She shocks and intrigues the family at the same time, and in her roundness and generosity seems to underline not only the thinness and pallor of Eve's character, but the thinness of Eve's characterisation. Pearl makes no apology for her brother's shop; she is neither embarrassed nor proud, and it is embarrassment and false pride that she flushes out from the hidden corners of the family interior. Before long, all the sores, old and new, are exposed. Flyn, a fluffy-minded movie starlet, the third daughter, flies in from location and is nearly raped by Frederick. 'It's a long time,' he tells her with less than winning charm, 'since I made love to a woman I didn't feel inferior to.'

Interiors starts in desperate earnest, with pale vases sitting limpidly on pale mantelpieces, making subtle statements, and Diane Keaton disconsolately spreading her long, fine fingers across a window-pane and contemplating what her poems might call the marine vacancies of Long Island Sound. It is because we have no confidence that she would be able to produce a decent poem, it occurs to me, any more than that her mother could design a room to live in, that makes you uneasy about the targets and values of *Interiors*.