

ART & ENTERTAINMENT

FILM

Diane Keaton broods about life and art in empty *INTERIORS*.Anguished *Interiors* no joke

INTERIORS

Written and directed by Woody Allen

With Diane Keaton, E.G. Marshall, Geraldine Page, Maureen Stapleton, and others
United Artists

As I stood on line outside the theater waiting to see *Interiors*, Woody Allen's latest film, a woman emerging from the previous show turned to her companion and said, "Janice, it's only 8:30! I thought we'd been in there at least three hours."

Interiors is that kind of movie: from its first frame it seems interminable. Its banality is so profound that everything in and around it is struck dead. Strong performers are overwhelmed by dreadful dialogue, by the kind of artsy direction that confuses heavy breathing for acting, by lugubriously unsympathetic camera work and by the embarrassment of living in a cinema world in which all thought and feeling are reduced to cliché. A lot of nervous laughter came from the audience at the showing I saw, almost as if people were saying, "Woody, you can't really be serious."

Serious, though, is exactly what Woody turns out to be. In this, the film represents a major departure for Allen. The film deals not with the insecurities of Allen's upwardly mobile Jewish *schlemiel* but with the unhappy, unfulfilling lives of a *haute bourgeois* family of New York Wasps.

The action centers around a decision by the father (a lawyer played, of course, by E.G. Marshall) to divorce the interior-decorator mother (Geraldine Page), after a lengthy separation which she had always imagined would be temporary. He wants to marry another woman (Maureen Stapleton) whom the three daughters (Diane Keaton, a poet, Kristin Griffith, a TV actress, and Marybeth Hurt, youngest and daddy's favorite who has not yet found herself) find unspeakably vulgar. While mother has structured a world in which colors range only from nutmeg to cinnamon, the Stapleton character enters wearing a shockingly red dress. Where mother has a fine eye for a Ming vase, the new woman has a sharp eye for card tricks.

Clearly something has got to give. On her wedding night Stapleton accidentally breaks a vase which had ponderously been in-

troduced for that purpose by the mother at the beginning of the film. Shortly thereafter, mother takes her leave via the ocean and is swallowed up by the elements.

Allen and cinematographer Gordon Willis lay on a thick veneer of Nordic monochromy to make the film look important, to cajole the audience into thinking its message to be of consequence. The film is a virtual compendium of pseudo-Beranesque touches and drips with empty images.

And yet the film is most uncinematic. It does not show things so much as explains them, comments about them. Marybeth Hurt spends the entire picture talking about what to do with her life, wearing an expression of unrelenting angst, yet we get Keaton's commentary that Hurt's trouble is that she has "all the anguish and anxiety of the artistic personality with none of the talent." Even Hurt is forced to put it into words: "I feel a real need to express something but I don't know what it is I want to express or how to express it."

The curriculum of *Interiors* is promotion of its own seriousness. But at the core, the film does not really seem to know what it is about. Of course it is "about" love, death, life, creativity and a slew of other Big Themes, but it approaches them backwards.

Rather than observing genuine, knowable people intimately to show the depths beneath life's daily reality, Allen arranges elements from life to create the illusion of depth—like one of Geraldine Page's bare interiors. The mother, who in a dramatic sense might be said to be at the center of the action, is too thinly drawn to justify all the fuss. Instead of dealing with the character, the film simply deals in convention. Thus, it is propelled by a kind of sophomoric determinism in which its characters are imprisoned in the most debased stereotypes.

The poet has lesbian friends; the drifting, self-hating youngest child wears rimless glasses and dresses badly; the actress wears no bra and takes cocaine. There are no surprises, since none of the characters actually think—they just spin out one platitude after another. "Political activity is not my interest, I'm too self-centered." "I can't seem to shake the real implication of dying—it's terrifying." "Inside your sick psyche is a sick soul." *Interiors*

simply has no interior.

The choice of *Interiors'* pale and austere atmosphere was obviously not whimsical. For Allen, austerity is the emblem of seriousness, as if weighty matters could only be exposed in an atmosphere of extreme refinement, and as if the suggestion of fecundity and warmth were inimical to the exercise of the intellect. With the exception of Maureen Stapleton's wonderful embodiment of life force, all the characters are bloodless and unattractive. The division is clear: fecundity stands for feelings and austerity for mind. In the camp of the fecund resides humor and so Allen strives mightily to keep the picture completely humorless.

What makes the comedies of Woody Allen marvelous is that he treats—especially in a film like *Annie Hall*—his own attitudes as clichés. Allen has a wonderful eye for the ludicrous in the everyday lives of certain kinds of people, and for the laughable and ridiculous in our favorite urban neuroses. He has never been afraid to ridicule his worst fears—and ours.

Interiors presents precisely the same clichés but without irony, without humor.

Still, after seeing Allen's comedies, 90 percent of the lines sound funny. Maureen Stapleton's first dozen lines, for example, are a virtual encyclopedia of low comedy "vulgar woman" statements. She has to reel off the likes of, in a discussion about Greece, "If you've seen one good ruin you've seen them all"; and in a discussion of cuisine, "Give me a good sirloin steak any time." At one point Diane Keaton announces meaningfully to her heavy drinking failed-novelist husband, "I just experienced the strangest sensation." He replies, "You look kind of pale." What the old Woody would have done with a line like that!

Some years ago, Allen made a picture called *What's Up Tiger Lily* in which he superimposed an English soundtrack on a Japanese spy movie with hilarious results. This raises very suggestive possibilities for *Interiors*. If the film could be redubbed, even with the same script read a bit differently, it might make a pretty funny movie. The only alternative would be to dub it into Swedish.

—Michael Sorkin

Michael Sorkin is a free-lance writer living in New York.

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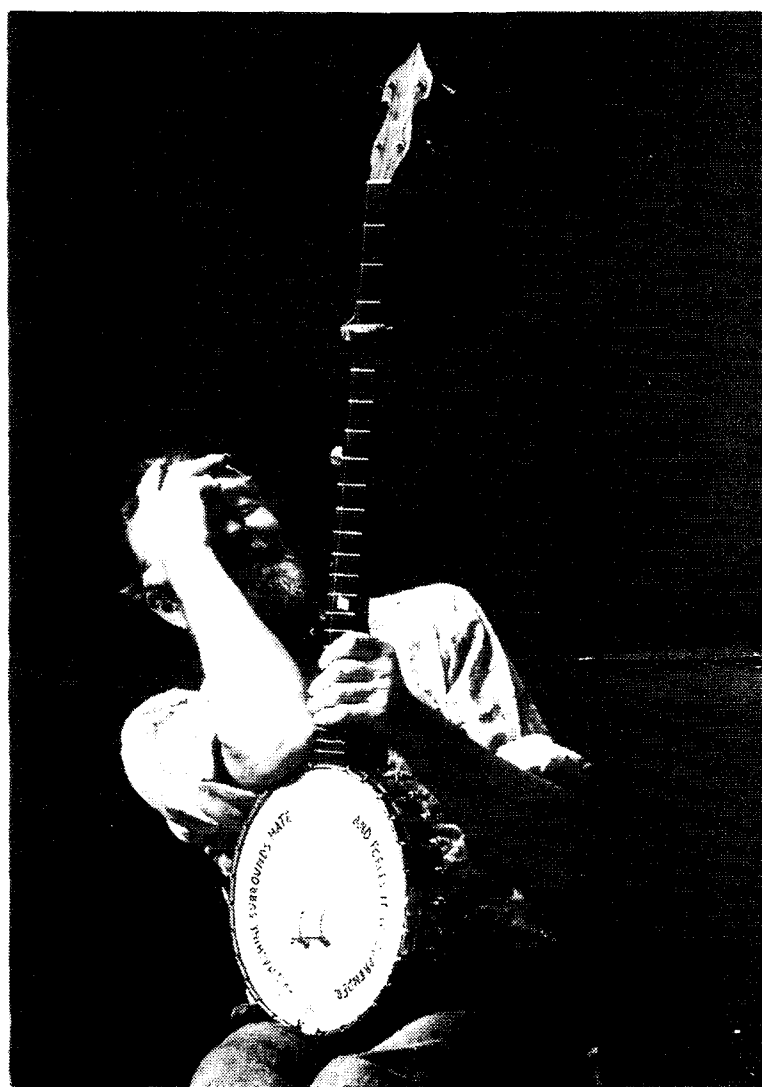
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BOOKS

Muckraking novel, still current, mixes romance and rage

BOSTON: A Documentary Novel of the Sacco-Vanzetti Case
By Upton Sinclair, reprint of the 1928 edition with an introduction by Howard Zinn
Robert Bentley, Inc., 1978, \$15

In the final desperate months before the execution, the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee attracted enormous support in the American intellectual community. Though many writers and artists came to Boston only out of curiosity, they soon found themselves delivering speeches, marching in front of the State House, and getting arrested on the Commons.

By 1960 a total of 144 poems, six plays, and eight novels about Sacco and Vanzetti had been published, unanimously siding with the condemned.

Two-pound novel.

Of all the writers associated with the case, muckraking novelist Upton Sinclair emerged from the furor with the broadest understanding of the case's social implications. His two-pound novel, *Boston*, written in the heat of the moment, wisely steered away from a further sifting of the legal evidence and instead told the story of the political interests which had brought the case to court.

Boston went out of print sometime between the Second World War and the McCarthy era. By 1977, the 50th anniversary of the Sacco-Vanzetti execution, even most library copies of *Boston* had disappeared. (The library catalogue in downtown Boston, for instance, listed one non-circulating copy.) Since the chicanery described in *Boston* remains substantially unchanged today, and

since Sinclair imbued the familiar pieces of the puzzle with suspense, this new edition is a valuable act of literary rehabilitation for another generation of readers.

Boston is huge, rich-textured social novel of the sort rarely attempted today. For any reader of *Ragtime* or Coover's *Public Burning*, there is, too, the added enjoyment of re-discovering the semi-documentary style with which Sinclair experimented. Sinclair himself defined the result as "contemporary historical novel."

The novel begins in the years prior to World War I, well before the trial, when a wealthy 70-year-old widow, Cornelia Thornwell, leaves her family to make her own life. She finds work in a Plymouth cordage factory and boards at a house with a laborer-anarchist named Bartolomeo Vanzetti. This first year of her independence turns into a political education for the old woman, and she returns to Boston an obstinate troublemaker and an irritant to her family. When Vanzetti is arrested with Sacco, Cornelia defends them first as friends and later with a growing sense of the larger principles at stake.

Romance and outrage.

Romantic as the Thornwell story may be, Sinclair gains several important advantages by his choice of viewpoint. Through Cornelia's sons-in-law, Sinclair shows the blue-blood mill and banking establishment doing battle with the Irish politicians and secretly pulling the strings in every power struggle. Because the plot follows Cornelia's awakening, the Dedham trial—which

COMING HOME TO ROOST.

