

THE ARRANGEMENT

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# The Arrangement: Kazan's Styrofoam Sledgehammer

by Paul Schrader

**THE ARRANGEMENT.** Warner Brothers. Produced by Elia Kazan. Written and Directed by Elia Kazan, from his novel, *The Arrangement*. Cinematography: Robert Surtees, A.S.C.. Music: David Amram. With Kirk Douglas, Faye Dunaway, Deborah Kerr, Richard Boone, Hume Cronyn, Michael Higgins, John Randolph Jones, Carol Rossen, Anne Hegira, William Hansen, Charles Drake, Harold Gould, E. J. Andre, Michael Murphy, Philip Bourneuf and Dianne Hull.

For an artist the risk of intensive self-psychoanalysis is always normal. If the roots of neurosis and artistic genius lie too close together, too much knowledge about the former may impair the latter, as was the case with the later works of Coleridge. Freud realized this and quoted Schiller on the possibly detrimental effect of analysis on art: "It hinders the creative work of the mind if the intellect examines too closely the ideas pouring in... (one should not be) ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators." Although no hard and fast rules can be drawn, the tension between "sanity" and "art" is certainly basic to the creative process.

In his film *THE ARRANGEMENT*, Elia Kazan, perhaps not a genius but certainly one of America's best directors, gives his life excruciating self-analysis of a type virtually unknown to American cinema. He ruthlessly examines his "passing madness" and, in the mysterious process of art, transforms it into something commonplace and mediocre. The final result of Kazan's dark night of the soul is, tragically, pure American kitsch. From the immediate perspective of *THE ARRANGEMENT* it seems that Kazan either looked deep into his psyche and found only hoary movie conventions, or that he looked within himself for the wrong things.

There is no doubt that *THE ARRANGEMENT*, novel and film, is one hundred percent Elia Kazan. While writing the novel he told a

French interviewer, "Ultimately it talks about me. I am the subject. Although not everything in it is me. I mean, the feelings are mine, my feelings about America. At this moment in life, I have drawn up a balance sheet, a focusing of what that life has been. It is, too, my life as an American, my thoughts as an American. It is a balance sheet, but also a re-evaluation." Kazan recently stated that he made *THE ARRANGEMENT*, like *AMERICA*, before it, because "I was sick of making other people's films." In *THE ARRANGEMENT* Kazan is autobiographical in a way few directors dare to be, or are allowed to be (*THE ARRANGEMENT* cost approximately \$10 million). The best parallels for *THE ARRANGEMENT* are either foreign (Fellini's *8½* and Wadja's *EVERYTHING FOR SALE*) or underground (Stanton Kaye's *BRANDY IN THE WILDERNESS*). A large measure of *THE ARRANGEMENT*'s difficulties lie in the fact that it is so autobiographical and intense, and these difficulties have caused the film to receive extremely snide and unsympathetic reviews. Whatever Kazan's failing as a film-maker are, cowardice is not one of them.

*THE ARRANGEMENT* concerns Eddie Anderson (Kirk Douglas), a middle-aging West Coast ad man who, in Kazan's words, "takes a look at himself and doesn't like what he sees." Eddie's life is strictly in the first-person. With complex

stream-of-subconsciousness style, Kazan intercuts between Eddie's past, present, and fantasies. The two loves of his life (Deborah Kerr and Faye Dunaway) continually dissolve into each other. After flirting with various forms of madness, Eddie finally absolves himself of his old life, represented by his father (Richard Boone) and by his wife.

*THE ARRANGEMENT* looks and feels like melodrama. Its flaunted sensationalism is unredeemed by either subtlety or conciseness. Kazan and his set director, Audrey Blasdel, have given *THE ARRANGEMENT* that legendary gauche Hollywood set design which can make the Grand Canyon look like a painted backdrop. The over-decorated New York "poverty" flat looks as artificial as the plush suburban L.A. home (to appreciate the scope of Miss Blasdel's contribution one only has to realize that Kazan actually went on location for these scenes). The film's vulgarity could be seen as a reflection of Eddie's vulgarity, but Kazan constantly undermines this: the sensitive as well as insensitive aspects of Eddie's life have a crass sheen to them.

Kazan's dialogue has always tended toward melodrama, but in his earlier films he used writers like Budd Schulberg who were able to give the melodrama a redemptive toughness. In *THE ARRANGEMENT* Kazan scripts his own novel, and the dialogue is singularly soap-operatic. The drawn-out, dreary discussions of sex life, psychiatry, and business fortunes bring back



languid afternoons before the TV set. One was at least able to set the novel down for a breath of fresh air, but the film has the effect of six segments of SECRET STORM tied tail to tail. Kazan displays a sense of didacticism and crude metaphor which further help to discredit the action on the screen. When Eddie's ex-employers pay him a visit, Kazan intercuts it with TV footage of lionesses devouring a giraffe. Later Kazan shows the two Eddies — one nude and one smartly dressed — lying on a bed together. Kazan's characterization of Eddie is at times so slick that it destroys plot credibility. THE ARRANGEMENT begins with "old" Eddie, an energetic, hypertense early-riser who constantly listens for his ads on radio and TV — and then joltingly asks the viewer to believe that this broadly-drawn character was on the verge of suicide.

Above all, THE ARRANGEMENT suffers from crucial plot implausibility. The story line is structured upon the fact that Eddie could have been somebody if he hadn't sold out — a fact which Kazan accepts as given and does not appreciably demonstrate. But after fifteen minutes it becomes all too apparent that Eddie could never have been a writer — it was only a bourgeois delusion — and that he was probably best suited to what he was doing, being an ad man. Kazan's premise that Eddie is a thwarted talent endangers the whole of the film, because the fact that Eddie is Kazan's alter-ego certainly isn't lost on the audience, and if Eddie doesn't appear to have any potential, then the film seems similarly without promise.

For admirers of Kazan's earlier films, THE ARRANGEMENT seems a plaster pastiche of marred, classical sculpture. The wealth of themes in THE ARRANGEMENT — the search for a father, the loss of innocence, marital ennui, aborted aspirations — are pale reflections of his earlier work. The Boone-Douglas father-son confrontations are the most effective scenes in THE ARRANGEMENT, but they are only effective to the degree that they recall the depth of feeling in the Raymond

Massey-James Dean struggle in EAST OF EDEN. The madness of eroticism was alluring and viable in BABY DOLL; in THE ARRANGEMENT it becomes chic. The agony of being a "contender" riveted ON THE WATERFRONT together; the same theme lets THE ARRANGEMENT fall apart.

Although it looks and feels like melodrama, THE ARRANGEMENT strikes the viewer as substantially different than a slick commercial product like THE OSCAR. What first shocks the viewer about THE ARRANGEMENT is its total depth of feeling — THE OSCAR and the afternoon serials developed these situations with a perfunctory professionalism. In fact, its very seriousness makes THE ARRANGEMENT incredible. The viewer is put off from enjoying the film on a melodramatic level not only because of the complex intercutting, but also because the serious intensity of the film constantly reminds him that he should regard the film as something more. It is an annoying experience — like repeatedly being hit over the head with a styrofoam sledgehammer.

It seems barbarous to begrudge Elia Kazan the self-knowledge and peace of mind he has gained in

the six years of quiescence since AMERICA, AMERICA, but one has to be suspicious of a sanity which reveals itself in mediocrity. Kazan was much more immediate and effective while battling his passing madness — lack of national identity, marital stagnation, penance for past conduct — than he is in overcoming them. His early films displayed a rare talent: an ability to overcome the anonymous studio system and force others to act out his anguish and neurosis. In THE ARRANGEMENT Kazan is given the full range of economic power, and his personal psychodrama fills the entire screen. And yet Kazan can only reveal his hidden world through dull conventions. The world of THE ARRANGEMENT is not a less viable aspect of Kazan; it is only less valuable.

It would be unfair to assume that the Kazan of THE ARRANGEMENT is the "true" Elia Kazan. Kazan has halted at a certain stage in his development (a stage particularly unsatisfying to the spectator), but his hardest battle will be yet to come — the battle back from sanity to passing madness — to learn what makes him, like Brando's Terry Malloy and unlike Douglas' Eddie Anderson, a "contender." □

Kirk Douglas in "The Arrangement"

