

Diane Keaton's Only Documentary Was About the Afterlife

By [Alexis Soloski](#)

Keaton, who died on Saturday, was an actor, director and producer on multiple films and series. Her sole documentary, “Heaven,” explored popular ideas of the afterlife.



The actress Diane Keaton, whose death was announced [on Saturday](#), appeared in over 60 movies and produced about a dozen. She was also a director, with a brief but rangy résumé that include features, music videos, a TV movie, an after-school special and episodes of the television series “China Beach,” “Pasadena” and “Twin Peaks.” In 1987, she also wrote and directed her sole documentary, “[Heaven](#),” a surreal mix of interviews and archival footage exploring popular ideas of the afterlife.

In 2021, in [an interview](#) for the Golden Globe Awards, she described the movie as having clarified her own personal beliefs, beliefs that she described as being very simple. “Why would there be such a place as hell, for any of us?” she told the interviewer, adding, “I just don’t believe that.”

Much of “Heaven” takes place in a white room striped in odd, elegant shadows. Seated at a table, interviewees answer question such as “Is there sex in heaven?” and “What are the rewards of heaven?”

The interview subjects — ministers, atheists, children, courting couples, several of Keaton’s family members and the boxing promoter Don King among them — variously describe heaven as an open space; as gleaming with diamonds and gold; and as a young boy says, “all white, like marshmallows.” Several people assert, in perfect confidence, that you can’t get fat in heaven.

Between the interviews, Keaton layers a dense collage of archival film clips from movies like “Metropolis,” “Green Pastures” and “Stairway to Heaven.” In 1987, Keaton told an interviewer [for](#)

[Vanity Fair](#) that finding and editing the clips had been a particular pleasure. “Maybe what I’d like to do in heaven is look at images forever and select them,” she said.

Keaton had long been preoccupied with the afterlife. In that same interview, she described herself as having grown up as a morbid child with a fear of death. The oldest child of an Irish Catholic father and a Methodist mother, both of whom abandoned religion in the 1960s, she had an early interest in Christianity out of a desire to get to heaven. As an adult, she identified as an agnostic. “But I understand the longing and the need for more,” she told the interviewer. “For something better, fuller. For love.”

Vincent Canby, writing in The New York Times, had little love for the documentary, which he described as “[dumbfoundingly silly](#),” alternately patronizing and exploitative of its participants. And yet the movie seems imbued with and reflective of the qualities that made Keaton an enjoyable performer. It is questing, capacious, stylish, ironic, giddy.

Keaton approached religious questions in other forms as well. In the introduction to her 1983 photography book, “Still Life,” she wrote, “Heaven seemed a notion where everything was perfect; and by being perfect, heaven was motionless.” In 1986, she worked with a billboard artist to devise a set of religious paintings for the [Daniel Wolf Gallery](#).

In the Vanity Fair interview, she offered her own personal definition of heaven, one firmly located here on earth: “Staying alive as long as I can in good health, and with a good attitude.”