ALAN ALDA'S talent as a writer-director-star is also his Achilles heel: he's nice.

He seems to be a genuinely reflective man in a business made up mostly of people who shoot first and ask questions later, who never underestimate the possibilities of con-artistry and who have only the foggiest notions of right and wrong.

As he demonstrated with "The Seduction of Joe Tynan" (1979), the political comedy he wrote and starred in (but which Jerry Schatzberg directed), Mr. Alda sees the world not through the Hollywood movie-maker's periscope. He sees it in the round, more or less like the rest of us who ride subways and who read newspapers and books without hoping to find a hot property.

In "The Four Seasons" (1981), Mr. Alda's first film as a triple-threat man, his decency and generosity, as well as his gentle sense of humor, served the needs of a totally uncritical comedy about the enduring friendship of three middle-class couples. In the context of television's brainless sitcoms, Mr. Alda's compassionate, eye-level approach to the habits of the bourgeoisie appeared to be almost rigorously honest.

That honesty and niceness, however, are the undoing of his new film, "Sweet Liberty," which he wrote and directed and stars in as Michael Burgess, a college professor who's written a best-selling, meticulously researched historical novel set during the American Revolution.

"Sweet Liberty," opening today at the Tower East and other theaters, means to be a send-up of Hollywood manners and methods when a movie company invades Michael's small college town to shoot the screen version of the book, which, to his horror, has suddenly become a Revolutionary War comedy.

No matter how often the eccentricities of movie people have been used in plays and films (one of the funniest: that brief, soberly lunatic sequence from "The Bank Dick"), they remain rich with possibilities, especially when exploited by people who, like W. C. Fields, Kaufman and Hart, Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder, thoroughly enjoy biting the hands that have fed them. If Mr. Alda ever did such a thing, he'd probably apologize.

It's possible that "Sweet Liberty" is exactly the sort of movie he set out to make, though what the rest of us see is a mildly satiric comedy so toothless it wouldn't even offend a mogul as senstive and publicly pious as Louis B.
Mayer. It's also possible that Mr. Alda simply doesn't possess the quality of madness and imagination that would allow him to be rude in any exhilarating way.

Appearing with him are Michael Caine, as the suave, womanizing leading man of the movie-within-the movie; Michelle Pfeiffer, as the movie-within's co-star; England's Bob Hoskins ("The Long Good Friday," "The Cotton Club") as the unctuous author of the movie-within's screenplay; Saul Rubinek as the director of it all, and Lois Chiles as the college president's meandering wife. The great Lillian Gish appears briefly (and to the film's advantage) as Mr. Alda's nutty old mom.

All of the performers are severely limited by material that doesn't go anywhere, though Miss Pfeiffer, one of the great beauties of the screen, gets a chance to show that she has the potential to be a first-rate comedienne. Mr. Hoskins, often sounding like Mel Blanc as Bugs Bunny, gives a substantially comic performance when allowed, as does Mr. Caine, who is now such an accomplished actor that all he has to do is behave with self-assured grace.

Even Mr. Alda isn't particularly persuasive. He's not bad, but the role he's written for himself is thin, characterized mostly by the professor's fondness for adding an "O.K.?" after every declarative statement. Even more listless, especially when she tries for a breezy style, is Lise Hilboldt, who plays a professor whom Mr. Alda loves while bring afraid to commit himself to her.

"Sweet Liberty" rolls along in stately fashion when it's supposed to be rollicking. There's little feeling for the hysteria, the desperation and the excitement of on-location shooting, and none whatsoever for what the film-within might really be like.

Instead of laughing, as one expects to do at a comedy, one smiles at isolated incidents - at Mr. Hoskins's outrage that his small-town hotel room is a shoebox without a single piece of fruit. I also liked Miss Gish's flat announcement that she never eats anything that hasn't been sitting on the television set for at least 24 hours. "The radiation," she says, "kills whatever 'they' have put in it."

"Sweet Liberty," which has been rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"), contains some vulgar language and partial nudity. After the Revolution SWEET LIBERTY, written and directed by Alan Alda; director of photography, Frank Tidy; edited by Michael Economou; music by Bruce Broughton; produced by Martin Bregman; released by Universal Pictures. At Loews Tower East, Third Avenue at 71st Street; Loews State, Broadway at 45th Street; Loews 84th Street Six, at Broadway. Running time: 107 minutes. This film is rated PG. Michael BurgessAlan Alda Elliott JamesMichael Caine Faith HealyMichelle Pfeiffer Stanley GouldBob Hoskins Gretchen CarlsenLise Hilboldt Cecelia