

***Gosford Park*: Robert Altman's Cinematic Jazz Masterpiece**

Wayne Stengel

Robert Altman has always been the grizzled *enfant terrible* of American movies. Moody and idiosyncratic, many of his films occupy an esteemed and highly specific place in the development of a uniquely counterculture conception of American film-making. Long before Indies and Sundance, Altman was making *M*A*S*H*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and *The Long Goodbye*. His idea of film as organic form, some synergistic collective of talent, vision, improvisation, and social relationships is as old as Eisenstein and the Russian formalists. His tent-show carnival approach, fitfully realized in *Brewster McCloud*, reached its apex in *Nashville*, which transformed America into a country music lament as durable as Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," as corn pone and self-aggrandizing as DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth*. By the middle seventies, Altman's flying circus crash landed with *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, which said, in painfully obvious ways, that the old Wild West medicine show was a shell game, and the Indians were all those minorities and aliens that white settlers had chased into the territory.

Still, film buffs held out hopes that Altman's dream of the movies as an enormous airborne house party with the consciousness to seam huge gaps in our cultural tapestry might be realized in movies to come. *A Wedding*, *Health*, and *Short Cuts* were not the answers. Who could like the suburban Chicago yuppies, the Florida health nuts, or the soulless southern Californians in these over-edited, underdeveloped movies; and how could such isolated segments of American life represent the whole? *The Player*, an acid joke on the film industry that Billy Wilder might have directed in his prime, was much better, but it lacked the social empathy that has always been Altman's trademark. Altman's problem in the eighties and nineties was never in his masterful technique: the overlapping soundtracks which did effectively create the hum, chaos, and confusion of his worlds, nor the two, sometimes three, cameras with which he shot and edited his films. Rather, the uncertainty in Altman's movies since the seventies has been in the distracted atmospherics of his screenplays. Altman's great metaphor as a film maker has always been jazz, a classically conceived, indigenously American art form packed with riffs, scat, and recitative that, like some forlorn mongrel, must come back home to its base line by dinner time. Altman was trying to weave his world, most frequently an American world, into a musical, contrapuntal net of need and love, dependence or treachery, by using good actors and images, but without the necessary words, language, or clear sense of choreographed scene.

The wondrous thing about *Gosford Park*, Altman's thirty-fourth film, is that it has the best screenplay, a brilliant, symphonic roundelay of social relationships, of any movie that Altman has ever directed. Julian Fellowes, the British novelist and actor who wrote it, gives Altman what the American maestro has always needed: a precise scaffolding on which to hang his looping, counterpointing, highly intuitive sense of scene and vignette, situation and character. What's more, he takes Altman far away from his customary American concerns to an English manor house outside London in November 1932. By placing Altman so far away in space and time from what he normally views, Fellowes' screenplay infinitely sharpens Altman's perceptions. Every gesture and word, each fragment of scene and dialogue, is precise, telling, and on-target here. *Gosford Park* is any good director's dream of economy, style, and mobile, camera-fluent storytelling. Even at his earlier best, the published screenplays for *Nashville*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, or *The Long Goodbye*—such as they are—read like so much magician's smoke, full of gestural tics, actors, inflections, and approximations of the improvised effects Altman was devising on the spot for his performers, cinematographers, sound technicians, and lighting

specialists. Fellowes' screenplay, on the other hand, is a gloriously written, intricately arranged, and deliciously programmed precision blueprint.

We are at the country estate of irascible, arrogant Lord Trentham (Michael Gambon), who is quickly visited by his wife's aunt, the ludicrously snobbish, insufferably aristocratic Lady Constance, played to vain perfection by Maggie Smith. Joining her are a bevy of Lord Trentham's in-laws, nieces, and nephews, all on hand to celebrate the family's yearly weekend shooting party. You may not be able to follow the thirty-plus character relationships, ladies and lords, servants and valets, imposters and pretenders, the first time through, nor catch all the characters, whiplash dialogue, edited over and against their maid- and man- servants' words from downstairs. But unlike so many previous Altman screenplays, here every word, look, nuance, smile, or grimace counts and reverberates throughout the film.

There's nothing strikingly original about the premise or dramatic conventions of *Gosford*. Superficially and generically, the film adheres to the conventions of the British manor house movie, with an Agatha Christie murder planted two-thirds of the way into the film. The bumbling inspector from Scotland Yard (Stephen Fry) arrives and interrogates the scores of likely suspects. Both masters and servants are detained on the premises as antagonisms—social, economic, and sexual—seethe. Yet what makes the movie so compelling are the American flourishes that Altman places on Fellowes' quintessentially British materials. What fascinates are the actors' points-of-view that Altman's free-flowing jazz fugue imposes on Fellowes' order and structuring.

Fellowes himself describes the process of working with Altman in terms of jazz, commenting that the actors did not "only play the script," but they also "played behind the script," and that some of the best dialogue was heard as the camera, moving as if in a "waltz," pulled away. An early ensemble scene illustrates how the direction allows actors to "play behind" the dialogue. As the guests mingle for the first time in a large drawing room, the camera moves from cluster to cluster of guests engaged in patter, probing, or posing. Much of the witty mix of condescension and affectation becomes background noise (the actors all wore lapel mikes so that their improvised as well as scripted dialogue would register if needed) and what can be heard recedes quickly as the camera glides to the next encounter. At one point the Cary Grantish matinee idol Novello, played with suave, calculated charm by Jeremy Northam, having been left behind by the camera seconds earlier, reappears behind a sofa on which sits taciturn Baron Stockbridge (Charles Dance). The Baron's attempt to make small talk ends with an insult to the teaching profession, to which Novello replies, "[My mother] was a teacher." He begins moving even before he finishes his rejoinder, as if to both underscore and disguise his reaction. For his part, Stockbridge calmly turns to follow Novello's escape, saying to no one in particular and with no hint of feeling, "Well, that's marvelous, isn't it?" If the script intends a "melody line" of aristocratic pretense and cruelty, Altman's camera supplies variations on the theme.

Frequently the film seems told from the perspective of actress Kelly Macdonald. She plays a young Scottish servant girl who arrives at Gosford Park to tend the impossible Lady Trentham and quickly becomes enamored of the mysterious and brooding servant Parkes (Clive Owen), who she senses has a specific, dangerous mission at Gosford Park. She also sees through the bad Scottish accent of Henry Denton (Ryan Phillippe). Denton is the servant of Morris Weissman, the Hollywood producer of Charlie Chan movies who visits Gosford Park with Novello, a British-born Hollywood movie star and musical comedy player in some of Weissman's frail but profitable thirties films. Kelly Macdonald's servant girl is right. Phillippe's servant role is a scam; he's an actor doing research on the British class system for his next film job, an American performer who can do what many failing British aristocrats in the 1930's couldn't: play on both teams at once, understand gentry and servants simultaneously, and move, in Altman's jazz terms, from one scale, perspective, or point of view to another.

On occasion, the movie views Gosford Park from the perspective of Emily Watson. As Elsie, a sassy servant girl, she dares to side verbally with Gambon's Lord Trentham against his bored, philandering wife (Kristin Scott Thomas), while offering the assembled guests their welsh

rabbit. Of course, Watson, in a magnetic performance of consistent wit and sympathetic authority, has been Lord Trentham's lover. She deeply admires the tyrannical old man because he's the only person who has ever told her she can be anything she wants to be, can do anything she wants to do.

Finally it's the less than physically gallant American movie producer Weissman (Bob Balaban, who produced *Gosford Park* with Altman) and Novello who are Altman's stand-ins at Gosford Park. Weissman leaves the manor house persuaded that the British actually do have a sense of humor, that the assembled guests and their skilled servants are unflappable, even as murder suspects. "Murder suspects!" exclaims Northam's Ivor Novello in open disbelief. Admiring all these distinguished guests and their diligent retainers, he pays them the highest praise this transplanted citizen to Beverly Hills knows: "They could all be actors!" he insists. Complimented on his too debonair, insipid piano-playing, which bores the aristocrats and transfixes the serving class, Northam flashes a "what-did-you-expect" smile: "I earn my living by impersonating [the aristocrat]," he exclaims. Considering the tenuousness of their acceptance of him, Novello might as well have said, "I earn my living by improvisation."

So does Altman, but never so felicitously as in *Gosford Park*, and never have his jazz riffs been so artfully contained in so seamlessly, movingly written a screenplay, or held together by the concentrated force of such wonderful performances. In addition to surprising, deeply affecting work from Watson, Phillippe, Northam, and Scott Thomas—actors who have suggested considerable talent in weak or over-the-top movie roles previously but who really catch fire here—there are subtle, on-the-mark characterizations from Derek Jacobi, Richard E. Grant, Stephen Fry, Charles Dance, James Wilby, and perhaps most memorably, from Alan Bates. As Jennings, the nervous head butler, Bates is the character who most fears the encircling net of even the bumbling Scotland Yard lieutenants sent to investigate the murder at Gosford Park. Bates is a servant with a previous criminal record, a conscientious objector whose hatred of war took him to prison rather than the trenches of the Great War. In a brilliant thirty seconds before his mirror, Bates reveals why he is now a captive in the prison and trenches of Gosford Park.

Bates and most of the ensemble are on fullest display in the long sequence that leads up to the murder. In an expertly managed series of exits and entrances, Altman provides the necessary suspects for the crime, but his real achievement lies in how he uses the scenes to counterpoint the two worlds of Gosford Park. While the aristocrats lounge in a well-lighted and plush drawing room, the servants eavesdrop in the darkened outer rooms and hallways. Meanwhile, in the inner sanctum, Lord Trentham sulks and verbally abuses a servant.

During the exits and reentrances, some of which bring lord and servant into brief contact, designated entertainer Novello plays his compositions. The aristocrats suffer none too silently his romantic tunes, but the servants listen in dreamy repose. Ironically, they are entranced by Novello, whose songs both idealize and satirize (in large part unwittingly) the privileged life about which they can do no more than dream. By juxtaposing the ennui of the masters to the resting or energized servants, Altman suggests the ebbing vitality of one world and the waiting force of the other.

Of course, the whole sequence featuring this riff on the symbiosis of two classes was brought on by Elsie's impulsive intrusion into the quarrel between Sylvia and William, Lady and Lord Trentham. William's intimacy with servant Elsie is exposed, scattering the dinner party and sending Lord Trentham to the library. Those left behind strain to keep up appearances. Earlier in the film, Elsie tells one character that "appearances are deceiving." This cliché applies in many ways. The sequence in question shows the deceptive surface of this decaying world inhabited by two restless, interdependent groups. The dapper Novello suggests the glittering, polished image to which so many people are drawn or from which they are expelled. Out of plain sight, in the library, where retribution is exacted, beats the true, corrupt heart of Gosford Park.

For a viewer like myself, over fifty, *Gosford Park* does make me wonder if I will live long enough to see another film of this style and sophistication with such uniform excellence of

ensemble acting. Yet Altman and company save the best for last: two grande dames of London theater and hardly slouches as film actresses, Helen Mirren and Eileen Atkins, as head housekeeper and chief cook respectively, have a confrontation scene within the final moments of the movie that is magnificently performed, emotionally searing, and fully revelatory of the great pain of being two perfectly trained, repressively tormented servants at Gosford Park.

Not long into this film you realize the unfailing notes of high-grade artistic energy that everyone involved in the production is contributing to its flow and momentum. *New Yorker* film critic David Denby says that Altman's direction moves from upstairs gentility to downstairs working class and back again with increasing erotic intensity. Indeed. This movie is one of the great films about relationships between sex, class, and social stratification, the denial of freedom and the suppressed violence such a world creates. *Gosford Park* is a vision of ornate dining rooms and dressing rooms, passageways and hallways, and downstairs cooks' quarters, pastry blocks, and kitchen ovens. At long last, everything about Altman's most sensuous circus finally looks and sounds exactly right: Andrew Dunn's burnished autumnal photography, which goes downstairs in murk and shadows, and climbs back up in drizzly greens, grays, or overlit golds; Stephen Altman's art direction and Jenny Beavan's costumes that actually look like the atmosphere and clothing of early thirties England, not Cecil Beaton costumes nor Ealing Studios architecture designed to sell a movie; Tim Squyres' stately, measured editing, wisely never as quick as Fellowes' screenplay or Altman's overlapping soundtracks; and even Patrick Doyle's hybrid musical score, half wistful thirties mood music, half late jazz-age syncopation.

Gosford Park moves with the grace and fluidity of a deceptively dying world. In the brilliantly choreographed fall of its rhythms and its Chekhovian social penetration, it has all the artistry of the greatest international films about social dissolution: Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*, Max Ophuls' *The Earrings of Madame De*, Luis Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel* and *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoise* and, most directly, Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*.

When Altman won the Golden Globe for directing *Gosford Park* in late January 2002, he said in his acceptance speech that he had finally realized that the most important thing a director can do around actors of this magnitude is to become invisible, to stand back and get out of their way. Nonsense and balderdash. Here, in one of the most perfectly acted films in recent years, Altman stands back and lets great actors act, but in doing so, he fully achieves a great jazz poem. Catching British society in muted, waning days, *Gosford Park* observes what Altman's best films have always discovered: art and improvisation are for survivors. Creative freedom, also a survivor's skill, comes to all those individuals, artists and actors, masters and servants, who learn how to break the rules, bend the walls of their social prisons, and fly away home. Late twentieth century American society with its home-grown insistence on freedom lacked all the rigid social mechanisms—the rules, limits, and constraints—to demonstrate Altman's simple American jazz. After nearly fifty years in the movies, Altman goes to England, and mostly English materials, to come home again. Ironically, *Gosford Park* has a more exactly recreated sense of place and time, mood, and atmosphere than any Altman film since his depiction of Depression-era American crime and innocence in *Thieves Like Us* in 1974. There are full-bodied strokes of genius in *Gosford Park*. At seventy-eight and still without an Oscar, Robert Altman is to be honored and revered for the sustained sumptuous beauty and consistent formal elegance of this masterwork: a quietly ravishing film.

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