



ROBERT ALTMAN

LEGENDARY DIRECTOR ROBERT ALTMAN CHANGED AMERICAN CINEMA IN THE 1970S AND IN SO DOING, CHANGED THE WAYS WE LOOK AT THE STORIES OF OUR OWN LIVES

One could argue that the greatest director in America is the guy who gives his audience what box-office polls say America wants: more blood and muscles, more dazzling explosions and deadly gunfire, more tears and reunions, and please, please, more happy endings to give us a semblance of peace. But those film addicts who rank Robert Altman as the greatest living director in America seem to like their pictures with far more honest effects. Ever since he astounded viewers in 1970 by putting out *MASH*, a movie that dared to look at war with humor and humanism instead of hackneyed heroics, the director has been seen as one of the rare few to cut through the crap and illusions and paint life as it is. This means, in an Altman film, we get characters—usually lots of them—that drift in and out of the frame, often caring more about their own lives than advancing the main plot. We get conversations that take more than three lines to deliver their purposes. We get extended scenes that focus on the strange or quotidian behavior of the cast. And, perhaps most heretical to the strict cinematic formula, we get films whose endings don't tie every string together in a perfect bow. Altman was the seminal director of the 1970s and reemerged to prove himself one of the masters of the last ten years. He's messed with every stock genre from the noir detective story (*The Long Goodbye*) to the western (*McCabe & Mrs. Miller*), the murder mystery (*Gosford Park*) to lovers on the lam (*Thieves Like Us*). Meanwhile, he's directed some of cinema's most powerful performances, from Shelley Duvall in *3 Women* to Karen Black in *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, from the entire cast of *Nashville* to practically the whole ensemble of *Short Cuts*. At age 79, the iconoclastic Mr. Altman has just released *The Company*, his new film about the world of modern ballet. He's also at work on his next picture, *Paint*, about the enigmatic double-dealing of Manhattan's contemporary art scene. Sometimes real places are the most unbelievable.

Christopher Bollen

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN I heard you had the premiere last night for *The Company*. How did it go?

ROBERT ALTMAN It was terrific. It's not easy to get up the day after something like that. We had the party at Elaine's.

CB It's pretty interesting that you're putting out *The Company* right now. You made a number of remarks during the Bush administration—

RA Aren't we still in it? You stilled my heart. I thought some great miracle had happened.

CB No, unfortunately, we're still in it. But I'm thinking specifically about how you connected 9/11 to superviolent Hollywood filmmaking. This holiday season, in the midst of "postwar" Iraq, four big-box-office violent war films are out in theaters.

RA I can't help that.

CB No, but you're releasing a completely different kind of film—about modern ballet.

RA Neve Campbell and Barbara Turner spent two or three years planning this film with the Joffrey Ballet. And I came in at the end and rejected it for a while because I didn't know anything about ballet. Then I decided, that's probably what I should be doing, going into new arenas.

CB Do you usually pick subjects or worlds that you know something about? I know you hadn't been to Nashville, for example, before you started work on that film, right?

RA Absolutely correct. I usually try to go into arenas that I don't necessarily know much about or have great opinions about, but that I do have a feeling about. Whether you're a dancer or a country singer or a hooper, they are still performers. They are people that stand up in front of other people and do things. These are the arenas that fascinate me.

CB You are known to use first-time actors in your films. You were the one who discovered Shelley Duvall in a Texas mall. Cher's first role was in *Come Back to the Five and Dime*. The dancers in *The Company* seem completely comfortable in front of the camera. But these are real dancers, not movie stars. >

“I DON’T WANT TO DO SOMETHING I’VE ALREADY DONE. I CAN’T TELL YOU THE AMOUNT OF MONEY I WAS OFFERED IN THE LAST THIRTY-FIVE YEARS TO DO A *MASH* SEQUEL OR TO DO THAT TV SERIES. BUT I CAN’T. I’D BE AFRAID I’D BE LATE FOR WORK.”

—ROBERT ALTMAN

RA I wondered if it would work, too. But I realized that these people are not shy, they spend their lives in front of mirrors. So they don't have stage fright. But they don't speak and they don't think three-dimensionally. So when we were shooting, we just went ahead and said, "Why don't you talk to this character about this, and that character about that—you know, have a conversation." The best attitude to have is the easiest one, which is the truth. If you don't like this person, don't act like you do.

CB How complete are your scripts before you begin? What I love in your films is how the characters drift in and out. They aren't just used as devices to advance the story. It feels natural. How much leeway do you give with a scene?

RA I give great leeway because a story or plot is not particularly important to me. I'm more interested in behavior. There is only one real plot. You are born, you live, and you die. When you say "They lived happily ever after," we know that probably isn't true. So for me, it's all about the way people act and behave in the milieu they are in.

CB You're known for being an iconoclastic filmmaker, taking stock film genres—the musical, the western, the murder mystery—and subverting them. When you start a project, does this intention enter your head? Do you think, How am I going to fuck with the war movie now?

RA It's an interest, but it isn't anything I set out to do. I don't think, how am I going to turn this on its ear? I work much more on the moment, how does this occur to me, okay, here's how it looks to me. In general, we have false opinions of things. Our opinions are public relations. But I try to get to something other than the general consensus. The sets and the wardrobe in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* apparently went against what all westerns had been or how people thought about them. I looked at the old sets and costumes used for westerns and said, "Is that really true?" Warner Bros. sent up all these western period costumes to Vancouver. All these big tall cowboy hats.

CB The kind people still wear today, thinking that it's authentic old west.

RA Yes, but I said, these aren't correct. *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is set in 1901. And they said, "Oh, no, here's the proof—a historic picture of a cowboy with a big hat, labeled 1896." Now negative film costs at that time two bucks for one picture. Very expensive, so you didn't waste film. Here's the photographer of this town, and someone comes in and says, "Hey, get your camera, some dude is here with the goddamnedest hat you've ever seen." Of course he takes a picture of him. Eighty years later the research department says, "Ah, here's the proof. That's what they all wore because here is the picture of it." I say that's the proof that it isn't what they normally wore because they wouldn't have taken a picture of it if they did.

CB For *MASH*, you dirtied the soldier and hospital uniforms, too, to make them look used. This was a time when they were filming *Patton*, and they used crisp, new clothes in every shot for war scenes.

RA In *MASH* we had, this is a guess, like sixty different colors for blood. Anybody who knows medicine can look at the color of blood and know how severe the condition of the person is. If someone is hit by a car and you are the first one there, if that blood is red and bright, they are probably okay. If it is dark and black, they are probably dying, so we would be aware of those things and wouldn't say, "Oh, just make it a bloodbath." Blood is not always the same color. It's a matter of looking at what's real. You could say, "Well, real isn't dramatic enough." But then you are trying to force the drama into it. And it doesn't work that way. You start to deal with untruthful things.

CB *MASH* was a huge breakthrough in American cinema in the early '70s. That was a time of a real shift in Hollywood, with movies so much more explorative than the decade earlier—

RA And after, too.

CB Yes, and now, sadly.

RA Yes, and now. The inmates took over the asylum at that time. There were no longer the Jack Warners or Louis Mayers running Hollywood with their precise systems anymore. Writers like Fitzgerald or Faulkner, who wrote for the movies, would have their pages taken at the end of each day and couldn't say, "Wait, I'm not finished." A guy with a cigar stuck in his face was making the decisions. If these writers were fired, others were brought in. The whole thing was built like a widget. When those studio heads died out, it was the end of the '60s. New guys came in who were agents and corporate heads, and they didn't have any opinion, so they turned over the content and styles to the artists. And we ran with it. Now, it's not the same.

CB But you've managed to keep control of your productions. RA Nobody's had a luckier career than I have. Nobody. I've done forty films, and they've all been at my own choosing. None of them have been taken away from me successfully. Now when movies come out, they say, "You're going to see the director's cut." You won't see that with any of my films, because every film you've seen is the director's cut. I'm the only one with that much luck. People have made a lot more money, but that's such a terrible liability. My ambition is to break even at the end. I certainly don't want to die and have left a lot of money. I should have used it up myself.

CB Even though you've achieved that kind of success, many of your films are really hard to find. I'm talking films that people reference all the time, too, not obscure ones. You can't walk into Blockbuster and rent *3 Women*.

RA That's because there's no popular demand for it. We released *Dr. T & the Women*, and they did research on it and came to me and said, "I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but ten percent of the population knows your name." You stop people in the street and they don't know who Robert Altman is. In Chicago and Minneapolis and Kansas City, my name doesn't mean anything. And in a way, that's good for me, because nobody's going to say I have to live up to something.

CB People aren't expecting the same thing from you each time, you mean.

RA I don't want to do something I've already done. I can't tell you the amount of money I was offered in the last thirty-five years to do a *MASH* sequel or to do that TV series. But I can't. I'd be afraid I'd be late for work.

CB You make terrific use of your casts. There are few leads in your films, more ensemble productions. How important is this sense of communication between actors? I heard great stories of how, on some of your previous films, the whole cast would hang out and party together every night.

RA For thirty-five of the forty films I've done, we've filmed on location. That forces a tighter community, when you don't sleep in your own bed every night. It's an important part of my work; I do this intentionally. I've got everybody out of their comfort zone, and they can share in the adventure. There's more a sense of community. And I like that. I think the actors, instead of having competition, then tend to root for each other, they embrace each other. Everybody's in the same rowboat. Normally, I have a screen set up with a big projection to show dailies, and at the end of the day, the bar opens and the grass would come out, or whatever people want to do... It's kind of a party. We don't take notes.

CB Your next film, *Paint*, is being shot here. It's about the contemporary art world in New York. Did you spend a lot of time in West Chelsea checking out the galleries?

RA I have done all that. This is again a world I'm not completely familiar with. I just have to look at it and let it grow like top seed.

CB Are you worried about the response from the art world? I know that when *Nashville* came out, people in Nashville didn't love it—

RA They hated it!

CB But when I lived in Nashville ten years ago, the locals did love that film.

RA You're talking about it a generation later. But the old guard of Nashville, when we made the film, hated that picture. One reason was that we didn't use their songs. They said, "You can't give that songwriting to amateurs." Well, I can give song-writing to anyone I want to.

CB In my experience of Nashville, while it does have its country stars, a large part of that city is amateurs—people working at IHOP with their guitar cases behind the counter. You captured a lot of that optimistic desperation.

RA Exactly. But if you worry about the reception certain people are going to give the film, you're making the film for the wrong people. The artists who I am working with now on this art film are incredible. They are amazingly unparanoid. Somebody is eventually going to say, "I'm not going to give my stuff because you'll do something funny with it," or "I know the kind of movies you make." But so far they have been amazing. They are proud of what they do and they do want it to be seen.

CB And most people outside of this city haven't really seen the contemporary art world.

RA Right. And most of them aren't going to believe it. They'll think it's a film conceit. But it's truthful. Take an artist who brings an elephant down and puts it in a gallery—

CB Douglas Gordon at Gagosian!

RA Tell me someone did that, and I'll put it in.

CB A lot of directors lately have used you as an influence—even copied you. *Magnolia* comes to mind. But also David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. I saw that film and loved it, but three days later it finally occurred to me, hey, that's *3 Women*.

RA That's the most flattering kind of thing, and I love it. But that isn't as true as you think it is. We can all come up with the same ideas independently from each other because it all comes out of our humanism. P.T. Anderson is a bit of a genius. I could never do what he does. When I first met him, he said, "I just ripped you off." But he didn't. It's flattering that you just influenced someone's thought process.

CB I think you are the originator of atmosphere in American film. Your films are always so saturated with their surroundings.

RA The outside world invades my pictures. If I'm slated to shoot a scene one day, and for some reason, I don't, I shoot it a week later, it's a completely different scene. Everything has changed. It has to be a living art, a living thing. Otherwise, it doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference what the story is.