

AFI FEST 2017: Stephen Altman on His Fatherâ??s Legacy

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

As part of AFI FEST 2017 and the 50th Anniversary of the American Film Institute, a celebration of the late filmmaker Robert Altmanâ??s work , a true master and icon of American cinema, is on display through a series of films.

Robert and Stephen Altman
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Born in Kansas City in 1925, Robert Altman was one of the preeminent auteurs of American cinema, from his first studio hit M*A*S*H (1970) to his 39th feature A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION (2006). In the pantheon of American directors, Altman was a maverick who worked both inside and outside the Hollywood system. His films exhibit a trademark style of diffuse ensemble narratives, complex soundtracks and restless zoom lenses. Film remained Altmanâ??s tireless passion until his death in 2006, and he remains an iconoclast of modern American cinema. This year, AFI FEST is proud to present 12 of his greatest achievements.

Ahead of the festival retrospective, AFI spoke with Stephen Altman, Robert Altmanâ??s son and frequent collaborator. Stephen Altman served as the production designer on a wide range of Altman films, from THE PLAYER to GOSFORD PARK, which earned him an OscarÂ® nomination.

The Robert Altman Retrospective launches at AFI FEST on Thursday, November 9, with THE PLAYER. Head to the Film Guide for free tickets to all 12 Altman screenings.

AFI: You were a production designer on many of Robert Altmanâ??s films. Can you talk about what it was like to collaborate so closely with your father?

Stephen Altman: It was heavy teamwork. He told me what to do, and I said â??Yes, sir.â?• No, actually it started early on. I started as an apprentice editor and projectionist when I was 17, for CALIFORNIA SPLIT â?? if youâ??re a gambler, thatâ??s a great one â?? and on NASHVILLE, I was apprentice editor and did projection for the dailies, but during the day I was helping the sound team. He

had made that eight-track sound recorder, with seven mics, which was a new thing. Then I segued into property. I was then on the set for most of the filming, so [Robert Altman] got very used to me. It was an easy transition from there to being his property master and later his set decorator, then his art director, then production designer. I hadnâ??t stopped working for him since 1974. His last two films I didnâ??t work on. When he died, sadly, we were scouting locations for another movie. It was abrupt. Had I known that A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION was his last movie, I wouldâ??ve quit what I was doing and ran to it.

NASHVILLE
NASHVILLE

AFI: The AFI FEST Retrospective offers a wide-ranging survey of Robert Altman titles, including some his better known efforts such as NASHVILLE, as well as works awaiting rediscovery, such as VINCENT & THEO and KANSAS CITY. What are some of your personal favorites?

SA: MCCABE & MRS. MILLER may be one of my favorite films, not just a favorite â??Bobâ?• film. I think it stands out among all of them. I love THE LONG GOODBYE â?? just really watchable, and fun and interesting. M*A*S*H is timeless. Itâ??s still funny to me, and cool. NASHVILLE I may not like as much as everybody else does, but I get it. I understand why itâ??s insane and wonderful at the same time. Of all of them, MCCABE & MRS. MILLER is maybe more conventional in some way, with real movie stars.

AFI: And what about a film like SHORT CUTS, which is three hours long but thoroughly engrossing from start to finish, and with a huge tapestry of characters and interweaving plots?

SA: That was very personal for me. It was very funny. At the first screening, it shook me. I used to be in property and editorial and so I would end up watching every single frame of film like a hundred thousand times between dailies and cutting the film. When I moved into production design, I avoided editorial, so when I watched the first cut I thought, â??Oh this is fresh and new to me.â?• I left the screening and my dad called me the next day and said, â??I think everybody loved the movie except one person.â?• I said â??Who?â?• He replied, â??You.â?• I was just shaken by the movie. Itâ??s really heavy. I loved working on it. Thereâ??s another one, A WEDDING: itâ??s not similar but in an Altman kind of way, he turned it from a farce and a comedy into a tragedy without you realizing.

SHORT CUTS
SHORT CUTS

AFI: This retrospective is a treat for Altman fans, but is also meant as an entry-point for those who havenâ??t discovered Altman before. What would you say to a neophyte whoâ??s starting to navigate the world of his films?

SA: You can see a thread in a lot of them, but theyâ??re all really different. He never did the same movie twice. I would just say what he always said, which was, â??Giggle and give in.â?• Some of them are more commercial or accessible than others. You go from something like MCCABE & MRS. MILLER to NASHVILLE â?? thatâ??s a pretty big stretch in seven years.

AFI: 3 WOMEN is a good example of a movie that certainly would not be made today.

SA: Right. Exactly. That was the luxury of Fox films at the time. [Robert Altman] said, â??Hey, I had this dream the other night. I wrote a script.â?• And Alan Ladd, Jr., who was running Fox at the time, said â??Hereâ??s a million-and-a-half dollars, go to Palm Springs and make a film. Donâ??t go over budget.â?• Thatâ??s how he used to do those kinds of things. That was quite a fun time in the desert. Thatâ??s his real weird dreamy thing. He loved playing with the camera. He had this kind of a water-and-oil mobile sculpture, what he called â??the wave machine.â?• It looked like a flat aquarium. It had oil on the top and blue water on the bottom and it rocked back and forth on a machine and made what looked like ocean waves across the screen. He was always inventing those kinds of things. On QUINTET, he would put Vaseline on the lens to blur the edges.

3 WOMEN
3 WOMEN

AFI: Altman had the spirit of an independent filmmaker even while making studio films, where he maintained creative freedom. How did he accomplish that?

SA: For the most part, they let him go. On one of his later films, THE GINGERBREAD MAN, with Kenneth Branagh, he was more of a director-for-hire. His shooting style, his camerawork and his editing are pretty much done in his head as heâ??s making the movie. The studio basically got scared of the movie, took it away from him and gave it to a Hollywood editor to try and recut it, with traditional close-ups and that kind of thing. They couldnâ??t do it, and they couldnâ??t even put it back together. They gave it back to [Altman] later and said, â??Here, put it back together, do what you want. We canâ??t make any sense of this movie.â?• He had such his own style that it was hard for anybody really to interfere. Itâ??s hard to go onto the set and say, â??Youâ??re doing this wrong.â?•

On THE PLAYER, we have that 10-minute opening shot. That was no improvisation. That was planned to a T. We built a model of the parking lot, with models of cut-out people. The camera was on this crane with a partially flattened tire and we used the parking lot as basically a huge dolly, and we rehearsed the hell out of that. We could have probably used the first take and walked away. They used take 16, and wrapped right after lunch, and we were four days ahead of schedule. He was really efficient with his money, and everyone knew that, so I think the studios let him be because he would only spend a certain amount of money and come back with a movie. People were eager to gamble with him.

THE PLAYER
THE PLAYER

AFI: Why do you think Altman is a filmmaker we are still talking about today?

SA: He was innovative; he didnâ??t give in. He had basically final cut on his movies. He was never rich, never got big budgets precisely because he would never let the studios make a movie for him. He said, â??If you want a movie, Iâ??ll make my movie.â?• He was brutal to screenwriters â?? you give him your script and it may not be recognizable at the end of the day.

After POPEYE, which was deemed the biggest bomb in the entire history of filmmaking, it was hard for him to get any kind of work. Thatâ??s when he was filming one-hour plays in a theatrical stage the size of your closet. They offered him M*A*S*H 2. He said, â??I canâ??t do it. It would ruin my career. Iâ??d be like everybody else.â?• At the end of the day, everybodyâ??s pleased he didnâ??t do stuff like that. He stuck to his guns. I hate to put him on a pedestal but he was kind of pure in this way. He really

didnâ??t give in to the pressure.

Actors loved him so much because he basically said, â??Go out there and act.â?• Some people were intimidated by that, not having an actual script. â??Wait, Iâ??ve got to write my dialogue by myself?â?• The ones that loved it, embraced it, it was a big joy to them. I think he made everybody comfortable â?? except for the crew.



(Source: afi.com)

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Date Created
November 14, 2017
Author
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