



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

A Wedding

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

All the ingredients needed for a traditional family wedding are present and correct in Robert Altman's audacious social satire: class snobbery, racial prejudice, lechery, nymphomania, adultery, jilted envy, a whiff of incest, senility, alcoholism, drug addiction, and death. And it takes 48 principal characters to do justice to these and the many other taboos that Altman and his scriptwriting trio alight upon as southern blue blood Nina Van Pallandt and her Italian husband Vittorio Gassman welcome *nouveau riche* Chicago trucking tycoon Paul Dooley and his brassy wife Carol Burnett for the wedding of their children, Desi Arnaz Jr and Amy Stryker.

With more secrets and lies floating around than flakes of confetti, this is a cluttered compendium of sitcom and soap operatic clichés and caricatures spun into cinematic gold by a master of his craft. The odd subplot stalls, but the balance of savagery and poignancy is as perfect as Mia Farrow's scene-stealing, two-word performance.

David Parkinson, bfi.org.uk

'A Wedding': a contemporary review

Up to a point, at least, Robert Altman's celebration of the celebration of matrimony in *A Wedding* is irresistibly and uncomplicatedly funny. Eavesdropping at precisely the right moment, his camera is invariably well placed to pull a plum out of the surrounding chaos of socially amplified intrigues, obsessions, eccentricities, gaffes, resentments and pretensions. Obviously doomed from the outset by a doddering old bishop who very nearly fails to unite the happy couple at all by forgetting the relevant lines; barely surviving the inconsiderately untimely demise of grandma (Lillian Gish), who lies a closely guarded secret on her death-bed upstairs; eliciting several rattling skeletons from the stately closets of the socially registered family who are busily marrying into *nouveau riche* money; and reaching a nadir of screeching recrimination when bride and groom are believed (erroneously) to have been killed shortly after taking off in their honeymoon car – the wedding gradually becomes a looking-glass into which one peers, fascinated, at a minor key counterpart to the nine circles of Dante's inferno.

With Altman's actors as usual given their carefully controlled heads, his little set pieces are singularly easy to take. For instance, the illicit encounter in the kitchen garden between the mother of the bride (Carol Burnett) and the corpulently jovial uncle of the groom (Pat McCormick) who has pleaded sudden passion with such eloquence that she bemusedly yields. Rushing ecstatically into each other's arms, under the curious gaze of a bevy of pageboys and flower-girls, they merely contrive to judge angle and distance insufficiently well to fulfil E. M. Forster's maxim of 'Only connect...' Or again, even more sitcom in effect – but none the less engaging for that – the lemming-like rush for too few lavatories after the lengthy ceremony, which leaves the tottering bishop (John Cromwell), kindly guided to the brink of bliss in an anteroom, despairingly contemplating the infinity of mirrors behind one of which is the desired door.

Paradoxically, however, one also gradually becomes aware of the extent to which Altman is making his audience work for their easy laughs by leaving characters unintroduced, relationships unstated, undercurrents unstressed. At the very end of the film, for example, after all the horrors have been tidily tucked away under the carpet and a semblance of harmony restored, the professional wedding organiser (Geraldine Chaplin) and one of the bridesmaids (Lesley Rogers) sit gratefully on the front steps of the house to relax for a moment in the approaching darkness. Weddings, sighs Geraldine Chaplin, are so lovely, so sad when they end. 'Yeah,' murmurs Lesley Rogers, 'when it's over it gets real sad.' Given the travesty of loveliness we have just witnessed, the irony is obvious (all the more so in that the Chaplin character has been revealed as a lesbian). But the scene only acquires its full reverberation if one has also picked up en route the casual intimation that the gentleman glimpsed furtively screwing in the bushes earlier on was Lesley Rogers' husband, so that one begins to wonder whether her 'when it's over' referred not only to a wedding but to a marriage.

At the same time one realises, as the film progresses, that the 'naturalism' (comically heightened, of course) is gradually being abandoned for – in the phrase annexed by Jonathan Rosenbaum in defence of *Nashville* – a 'dialectic collage of unreality'. No one wedding could credibly throw out quite so many sins and situations as this one does. Yet Altman keeps on turning the screw, ever more outrageously, until the bones and ligaments of reality snap and, as in *Nashville*, one finds oneself confronted by an almost abstract microcosm which can be interpreted any way one wants.

Quite apart from its obvious symbolic connotations (religious, social, dynastic, hierarchic, authoritarian), a wedding would seem peculiarly apt to Altman's purpose since it is above all a solemn occasion upon which people are careful to be on their best behaviour in defence of all their little deceits and lapses, and also a joyous celebration in which tongues and manners are likely to be loosened enough to let the guard drop. Radiating outwards from the fact of the old grandmother lying upstairs in unacknowledged death as the wedding reception proceeds, a whole system of such defences is revealed. Two salient facts in particular emerge. One is that the materfamilias has fondly indulged one of her daughters (Virginia Vestoff) in an affair with a black manservant (Cedric Scott), always provided it is conducted exclusively within her four walls. The other is that she has equally complaisantly ensured the perpetuation of her dynasty. Her daughter, the mother of the groom (Nina Van Pallandt) has married an Italian (Vittorio Gassman) generally and indulgently supposed to have some romantic relation to the Mafia, but in fact a humble waiter solemnly sworn by grandma never to reveal his shameful origins.

As in *Nashville*, the socio-political caps left lying around fit very comfortably indeed, with even the wedding guests who fail to show up suggesting the bankruptcy of America's policy of goodwill. The trouble is that, whereas the characters in *Nashville* obstinately maintained lives and wills of their own, often running counter to the allegory and destroying its linear simplicity, here they exist only within, and in terms of, the wedding. *A Wedding*, in other words, is much more simplistic: good fun, but not, like *Nashville*, a kaleidoscopic reappraisal of the American dream.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1978-79

A Wedding

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Company:
Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Production Company: Lion's Gate Films
Executive Producer: Tommy Thompson
Producer: Robert Altman
Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler,
Scott Bushnell
Production Co-ordinator: Victoria Barney
Production Accountant: Ann Tait
Illinois Film Office: Lucy Salenger
Post-production Supervisor: Bill Sawyer
Post-production: Westwood Editorial
Production Assistant: Carole Keagy
Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
2nd Assistant Directors: Peter Bergquist,
Bob Dahlin
Script Supervisor: Luca Kouimelis
Screenplay: John Considine, Patricia Resnick,
Allan Nicholls, Robert Altman
From a story by: John Considine, Robert Altman
Director of Photography: Charles Rosher
Camera Operators: Jack Richards, Steve Poster
Camera Assistants: Jim Blanford, Ed Nielsen,
Gerrit Dangremond, Bobby Altman
Gaffers: Tim Evans, James C. Miller

Editor: Tony Lombardo
Assistant Editors: John Carr, Michael Altman
Painting of 'Bride for the people' by: Sally Benton
Prop Master: Dennis J. Parrish
Assistant Prop Masters: Steve Altman, Jeff Renfrow
Wedding Gift Table:
Carson Pirie Scott & Co Chicago
Wardrobe: J. Allen Highfill
Bridal Gown/Bridal Party Gowns:
Carson Pirie Scott & Co Chicago,
Alyce Designs Inc, Priscilla of Boston
Groom's Party Fashions: Gingiss Formal Wear
Make-up: Monty Westmore
Hairdresser: Jerry Turnage
Title Design: Pat Ryan
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Fanfare music: John Hotchkis
Music Supervisor: Tom Walls
Music Editor: Ted Whitfield
Location Music Recording: Jim Bourgeois,
Jim Stuebe
Sound: James Webb, Chris McLaughlin,
Jim Bourgeois, Jim Stuebe
Re-recording: Richard Portman
Sound Editors: Sam Gemette, Hal Sanders

CAST

The Bride's Party

Carol Burnett (*Tulip Brenner, mother of the bride*)
Paul Dooley (*Snooks Brenner, father of the bride*)
Amy Stryker (*Muffin Brenner, the bride*)
Mia Farrow (*Buffy Brenner, the bride's sister*)
Dennis Christopher
(*Hughie Brenner, the bride's brother*)
Gerald Busby
(*Rev David Ruteledge, Tulip's brother*)
Peggy Ann Garner
(*Candice Ruteledge, David's wife*)
Mark R. Deming
(*Matthew Ruteledge, son of David & Candice*)
Mary Seibel (*Aunt Marge Spar, Snooks' sister*)
Margaret Ladd (*Ruby Spar, Aunt Marge's daughter*)
Lesley Rogers (*Rosie Bean, a bridesmaid*)
Timothy Thomerson
(*Russell Bean, Rosie's trucker husband*)
Marta Heflin (*Shelby Munker, a bridesmaid*)

David Brand, Chris Brand, Amy Brand,
Jenny Brand, Jeffrey Jones, Jay D. Jones, Courtney MacArthur,
Paul D. Keller III (*Ruteledge children*)
Lillian Gish (*Nettie Sloan, the groom's grandmother*)

The Groom's Party

Nina Van Pallandt
(*Regina Corelli, the groom's mother*)
Vittorio Gassman (*Luigi Corelli, the groom's father*)
Desi Arnaz Jr (*Dino Corelli, the groom*)
Belita Moreno
(*Daphne Corelli, the groom's twin sister*)
Dina Merrill (*Antoinette Goddard, the groom's aunt*)
Pat McCormick
(*MacKenzie Goddard, the groom's uncle*)
Virginia Vestoff (*Clarice Sloan, the groom's aunt*)
Howard Duff
(*Dr Jules Meecham, Corelli family doctor*)
Ruth Nelson
(*Aunt Beatrice Sloan Cory, Nettie's sister*)
Ann Ryerson
(*Victoria Cory, Beatrice's granddaughter*)
Craig Richard Nelson
(*Captain Reedley Roots, a faculty member*)
Jeffrey S. Perry
(*Bunky Lemay, groom's friend, an usher*)
John Cromwell (*Bishop Martin*)
Luigi Proietti (*Dino Corelli I, Luigi's brother*)

The Wedding Staff

Geraldine Chaplin
(*Rita Billingsley, wedding co-ordinator*)
John Considine (*Jeff Kuykendall, chief of security*)
Lauren Hutton (*Florence Farmer, the film producer*)
Allan Nicholls (*Jake Jacobs, the cameraman*)
Maysie Hoy (*Casey, soundperson*)
Viveca Lindfors (*Ingrid Hellstrom, the caterer*)
Mona Abboud (*Melba Lear, Rita's assistant*)
Beverly Ross (*Nurse Janet Schulman*)
Harold C. Johnson (*Oscar Edwards, the chef*)
Alexander Sopenar
(*Victor, the wedding photographer*)
Patricia Resnick (*Redford, female security guard*)
Dennis Franz (*Koons, male security guard*)
Margery Bond (*Lombardo, female security guard*)

The Corelli House Staff

Cedric Scott (*Randolph, the houseman*)
Robert Fortier (*Jim Habor, the gardener*)
Maureen Steindler (*Libby Clinton, the cook*)
David Fitzgerald
(*Kevin Clinton, son of the Corelli cook*)
Susan Kendall Newman
(*Chris Clinton, Kevin's bride*)

The Guests

Pamela Dawber
(*Tracy Farrell, the groom's ex-girlfriend*)
Gavan O'Herlihy
(*Wilson Briggs, the groom's ex-roommate*)
Bert Remsen (*William Williamson, the only guest*)

The Musicians

Ellie Albers (*gypsy violinist*)
Tony Llorens (*bar pianist*)
Chuck Banks' Big Band (*ballroom band*)
Chris La Kome
USA 1974©
108 mins

* Uncredited

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**M*A*S*H**

Mon 17 May 20:30; Wed 19 May 14:30; Sat 29 May 20:45;
Thu 10 Jun 18:00; Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40

A Wedding

Tue 18 May 20:40; Fri 11 Jun 20:30; Wed 23 Jun 14:30; Sun 27 Jun 18:10

McCabe & Mrs Miller

Fri 21 May 14:30; Mon 31 May 18:30; Wed 2 Jun 20:45; Sun 20 Jun 18:30

California Split

Fri 21 May 17:50; Mon 24 May 20:50; Mon 31 May 15:45;
Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30

The Long Goodbye

Sun 23 May 18:30; Thu 27 May 20:50; Wed 2 Jun 14:30;
Sat 19 Jun 17:30

Robert Altman, Outsider and Innovator: An Illustrated Online Talk

Mon 24 May 19:00

3 Women

Wed 26 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 20:30; Thu 10 Jun 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 15:00

The James Dean Story

Sat 29 May 15:30; Mon 7 Jun 20:50

That Cold Day in the Park

Sat 29 May 17:50; Tue 8 Jun 18:00

Brewster McCloud

Sun 30 May 19:00; Sun 13 Jun 16:00; Fri 18 Jun 17:50

A Perfect Couple

Tue 1 Jun 17:50; Mon 14 Jun 17:50; Wed 16 Jun 20:45

Images

Tue 1 Jun 20:50; Sat 12 Jun 15:30; Fri 25 Jun 18:00

Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean

Thu 3 Jun 17:50; Sat 19 Jun 12:30

Thieves like Us

Thu 3 Jun 20:40; Tue 8 Jun 20:30; Mon 21 Jun 17:50

Fool for Love

Sat 5 Jun 16:10; Sat 12 Jun 20:40

Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson

Sat 5 Jun 17:30; Sat 26 Jun 15:10

Streamers

Sun 6 Jun 13:00; Mon 21 Jun 20:40

OC & Stiggs

Wed 9 Jun 20:40; Tue 22 Jun 18:00

Quintet

Sat 12 Jun 18:10; Wed 30 Jun 20:45

Popeye

Sun 13 Jun 12:50; Tue 29 Jun 17:50

Health

Tue 15 Jun 20:45; Sun 27 Jun 12:15

Secret Honor

Wed 16 Jun 18:00; Sun 27 Jun 15:50

Women in the Films of Robert Altman: An Online Panel Discussion

Thu 17 Jun 19:00

Beyond Therapy

Thu 24 Jun 17:50; Tue 29 Jun 20:45

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