



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

## **3 Women**

*3 Women* literally came from a dream. It didn't come from a dream in the way that I dreamed this, what I dreamed was that I was making this film. Or was going to. Catherine, my wife, had gone in to the hospital with a rather serious condition and I had just had a film aborted. I got home and my youngest son and I looked out at the beach, and I got into bed, and it had been a trying couple of days, and I dreamed this film. I woke up and took the yellow pad next to my bed and wrote a sketch for *3 Women* and went back to sleep. Then I dreamed more of it and woke to write some more. I cast it. Then I had two of the fellas that worked for me at the time came into the bedroom and I told them to go down to Palm Springs because we were going to shoot this in the desert but I wanted to be close to some fun.

Then I woke up. There was sand in my bed from my son, I hadn't written anything down, I didn't have a pad next to my bed. So I had dreamed the title, *3 Women*, and this image of where it took place. I got on the telephone to someone who was working for me and said, 'I found a terrific story. It takes place in the desert...da-da-da.' And the next day I was in Alan Ladd's office at Fox, and the next day we were driving to Palm Springs to look for locations. That really did come together out of a dream, but not the specifics of the film.

**Robert Altman in conversation with Geoff Andrew at the National Film Theatre,  
24 January 2001**

Interestingly enough, since he definitively abandoned the Hollywood genres with *Nashville*, Altman seems to have been intent on inventing a new kind of popular entertainment, a form in which the communal enterprise and creativity of actors, technicians and, ultimately, the audience count for more than any individual viewpoint. In this is both self-protection – the 'meaning' of the films becomes a function of what everybody puts into them, rather than of what the director intended to say – and some extreme form of the liberal quandary, how to give direction while seeming (or pretending) not to.

The idea [for *3 Women*] reputedly came to Altman in a dream: a picture of some ersatz, miniature suburbia set down in the Southern California desert, with actresses Shelley Duvall and Sissy Spacek already cast as two girls (one endlessly prattling about dates and domestic minutiae, the other a strangely wide-eyed, all-consuming adolescent) who share an apartment and work at a nearby geriatric spa. The film was a departure for Altman for many reasons. For once, the central performances were precise in meaning and execution, and ambiguity was derived not from some vague nexus of improvisation but from an indefinite context in which the interplay of colour and landscape suggested incipient transformations of a spiritual/psychological/metaphysical order. Altman seemed to have found his way through to a level of consciousness where he need no longer be frightened of the grandeur of his themes – youth and age, growth and change, civilisation and savagery – nor have to pretend that their exact significance depended on interactions beyond his control.

Their exact significance, of course, was never actually decided by the film. Altman remained sufficiently himself to ensure that no final interpretation could be ascribed to the director; but his approach had, for the moment, been turned around. Instead of presenting the audience with a mix of ambiguous characters and events, and Panavision imagery of indeterminate emphasis, to allow them to resolve matters as best they could, *3 Women* seemed to sparkle with a clarity of image and idea which came together as ambiguity in the spectator's mind. The 'dream' context conceivably released Altman's inhibitions about being seen to take too strong a hand in ordering reality, whereas in normal naturalistic circumstances his personal contribution is guarded, indirect or ringed about with self-mocking qualification (most noticeably so in *A Wedding*). Even in *3 Women*, he has been inclined to skimp the full potential for metaphor – or to avoid the risk of incurring pretentiousness – by making easier connections in terms of plot and character. (The last third of the film is an unseemly job of tidying up.) But *3 Women* avoids Altman's worst tendency of indulging his cast and cheating his audience – by keeping his ideas out of harm's way – for long enough to make one regret that so far it remains an isolated experiment in his career.

**Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1979**

Robert Altman's new film belongs to that rare category of imaginative works which defy analysis. Whatever the 'ideas' in it, they seem, both during its two hours running time and on later reflection, to be irrelevant. *3 Women* is a vision. It happens to use an enormous number of complex and sometimes wayward cinematic and narrative devices, and I can understand how alert and sensitive cinemagoers may be affronted by what they take to be perverse, obscurantist or downright pretentious. It is so rich and mysterious in its imagery that it is bound to set off radically personal reactions. There will be those who reasonably ask what it is 'about': Feminism? The nature of identity?

The heartlessness of the consumer society? I can only report that I was absorbed throughout and that pondering later I cannot find any of these questions important.

Standing before Bosch's painting 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' in the Prado we do not ask about meaning; later, reading that much of the imagery comes from the beliefs and habits of obscure religious and social sects acting on a profoundly paranoid imagination does little to help one's appreciation. One has been affected by a mystical apprehension of fear and beauty. To pursue this image in the same museum: confronting Velasquez' 'Las Meninas', an equally great work, there is nothing one does not want to know about the artist's use of space and paint; one wants to learn exactly what his political, emotional and artistic intentions were. There is an intellectual ferocity about the painting which invites critical scrutiny. So in Altman's *Nashville* there is a tumultuous social and political subtext which breaks through the imaginative substance of the film.

*3 Women* is certainly not a parable, and I don't think it is even an allegory, let alone a 'statement'. It is a vision of love.

**Julian Jebb, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1977**

3 WOMEN

Director: Robert Altman  
©/Production Company: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
Production Company: Lion’s Gate Films  
Producer: Robert Altman  
Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler, Scott Bushnell  
Post-production Supervisor: Bill Sawyer  
1st Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson  
2nd Assistant Director: Carol Himes  
Screenplay: Robert Altman  
Director of Photography: Chuck Rosher  
Editor: Dennis Hill  
Visual Consultant: J. Allen Highfill  
Art Director: James D. Vance  
Wardrobe: Jules Melillo  
Make-up: Monty Westmore  
Hairstylist: Kaye Pownall  
Title Design: Dan Perri  
Music: Gerald Busby  
Flute Soloist: Michael Carloff  
Sound: Jim Webb, Chris McLaughlin  
Re-recording Mixer: Richard Portman  
Sound Editors: David M. Horton, Bill Phillips

Cast:

Shelley Duvall (Mildred ‘Millie’ Lammoreaux)  
Sissy Spacek (Mildred ‘Pinky’ Rose)  
Janice Rule (Willie Hart)  
Robert Fortier (Edgar Hart)  
Ruth Nelson (Mrs Rose)  
John Cromwell (Mr Y.R. Rose)  
Sierra Pecheur (Ms Vivian Bunweill)  
Craig Richard Nelson (Dr Graham Maas)  
Maysie Hoy (Doris)  
Belita Moreno (Alcira)  
Leslie Ann Hudson (Polly)  
Patricia Ann Hudson (Peggy)  
Beverly Ross (Deidre Black)  
John Davey (Dr Norton)

USA 1977©  
123 mins

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

3 Women

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

The Long Goodbye

27 May 20:50; Wed 2 Jun 14:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:30

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

M\*A\*S\*H

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

Brewster McCloud

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

California Split

Mon 31 May 15:45; Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30

McCabe & Mrs Miller

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

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

A Wedding

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

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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