



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

# That Cold Day in the Park

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

Robert Altman had been working as a director for close to 20 years before he had a big hit with *MASH* (1970), and he followed that commercial success with some of the finest and most unpredictable American films of the 1970s. Serious coverage of Altman's work usually begins with *MASH*, but he had made an intriguing movie the year before, *That Cold Day in the Park*, which in some ways feels like the first real Altman feature: tough, exploratory, slightly mean-minded but also surprisingly empathetic. It's a little like Hemingway's wholly unexpected early short story 'Up in Michigan', which depicts the sexual awakening and pain of a lonely girl.

Altman had first offered the lead role of Frances Austen to Ingrid Bergman, who was somewhat insulted to have been asked to play such a repressed and disturbed character. Altman next sent the script to Vanessa Redgrave, who also turned it down but suggested that Sandy Dennis would be the ideal actress for this very difficult part. Dennis accepted the challenge, and Altman gives her full control here many times, especially in an extraordinarily intense and sustained four-and-a-half-minute monologue midway through the film.

In the first scenes, when Frances absent-mindedly hosts some of her much older friends in her gloomy home, Altman layers his soundtrack with chatter so that we can barely make out what her friends are saying, and this puts us right in Frances's head – she can't be bothered to hear them either. Frances speaks in Dennis's distinctively anxious Julie Harris-on-downers diction, as if she's constantly afraid of some sudden attack, and her face looks both girlish and ancient, like a schoolgirl decaying into an elderly lady before our eyes (Dennis was just 32 when this was shot).

Frances sees a boy (Michael Burns) sitting outside on a park bench, and she keeps returning to her window to look at him. When it starts to rain and she expresses concern for the boy, her friends discourage her interest in his welfare. Frances reacts to their callousness with an understanding little smile, one of many piercing details that illuminate Dennis's patient performance, which never spells anything out for us but always holds to a discernible through-line of emotionally grounded, cautious behaviour. She shapes her work here with consummate skill, never yielding to the more outré and notorious physical and vocal mannerisms of some of her lesser work.

Frances brings the boy in out of the rain and lets him sleep in the spare room of her neglected house. He's a nondescript blond, and he says nothing at all as she quietly chatters away, telling him how she nursed her senile mother until the old woman died. Altman discreetly posits this silent boy as a sex object for Frances, cutting to shots of his legs as she guiltily stares at him. Sex is something that Frances wants but is fearful of, and it's clear in the last third of the film that this conflict cannot end well either for her or her love object.

As a script, *That Cold Day* is in line with small-scaled women's pictures of this period such as *Rachel, Rachel* (1968) or *The Rain People* (1969), but it is transformed into something larger by Altman's wary curiosity and Dennis's shy, rich creativity. The basic situation between Frances and the boy is highly redolent of an older gay male taking in a younger straight male, a feeling only underlined when Frances goes out to get the boy a female prostitute to service him (Bruce LaBruce's 1993 film *No Skin off My Ass* is an outright gay homage to this obscure Altman movie).

This is a movie that isn't at all concerned with holding our attention. There's something insolent about its opaque privacy, and this insolence might be seen as either enthralling or alienating, but *That Cold Day* deserves more serious attention, both as a tentative beginning for Altman's mature style and a bookend for his glorification of Dennis in his mid-period *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), where she gives one of the all-time great film performances.

**Dan Callahan, *Sight & Sound*, April 2013**

### **A contemporary review**

*That Cold Day in the Park* is an impressive case for the bold adaptation. The events of Richard Miles' original novel have been relocated and their development followed through some radical changes. If the result is not a complete success, it is not because the adaptation is inferior to the original, but because many of the details in the new design are too tentatively sketched. The centre of the film is a complex and intense reality, but much else is so understated as to be barely stated at all. Too much about the characters remains nebulous and unexplained; as in one of the much used optical effects, there is a loss of focus and definition over individual behaviour, perhaps because so much of the film has been organised around the detailed creation of the central character, the lonely spinster figure made credible and individual by script and setting and a measured performance.

Sandy Dennis' emotional flutterings as tyro schoolteacher and young faculty wife have been drawn in and smoothed out behind the straight set of Frances' features. The old enthused and confused rush of emotion has apparently been scotched by the setting through which Frances moves, already grown old in the climate of the elderly company inherited from her dead mother, yet young enough to resist the implication that she belongs with them and quite stung when one of them proposes. Her apartment reflects the sombre feeling of the saturated, stifled air of the damp and dreary exteriors. And Robert Altman has applied this description of personality through the intimacies of setting to other characters: what little we know of the boy is an accumulation of the places he visits, such as the chaos of his home through which he briefly moves like an animal returned to its natural habitat. His quick progress up and down the several storeys is observed from the outside, with the camera moving up the side of the building as if viewing an animated cross-section. But these bits and pieces hardly provide a full enough picture of the character. His appeal to Frances lies in his docile mystery, but though we know more about him than she does – enough to dispel the mystery – it is still not enough to clear away a certain bafflement about what makes him tick.

In Richard Miles’ novel the boy has a clearly placed and defining existence as a male prostitute, an expensive luxury in a Parisian pleasure garden. In Gillian Freeman’s script he has become a quasi-hippy, part of what we are told is Vancouver’s large hippy population. So the film has contemporary significance, but the character has little substance as a representative of this supposed subculture. The presence of this given but ill-defined symbol of a freer way of life leads to further difficulties. It suggests an apparent theme, the contrast between a new generation’s unattached spirit and the jealously possessive frustrations of the uptight culture represented by Frances; but the film’s very intimate approach would suggest more a personal tragedy of a mutual failure of understanding – Frances compulsively caught up in her neurotic delusions, the boy too quickly and thoughtlessly accepting and exploiting her apparent generosity. This would seem to be the point of the swooning loss of focus effect repeatedly used, a coldly effective device suggesting some loss of control, a slipping away of thought and communication into a frozen unreality. In this light the responsibility for the final tragedy is as much the boy’s as Frances’, but the many half-suggestions of his sympathetic symbolic function tend to work against this implication. Sandy Dennis’ performance is a small triumph, but it leaves the film too much of an unbalanced equation which never works out to a satisfactory and wholly convincing conclusion.

**Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1969**

**THAT COLD DAY IN THE PARK**

*Director:* Robert Altman  
*©/Production Company:* Factor-Altman-Mirell Films  
*Presented by:* Commonwealth United Entertainment  
*Producers:* Donald Factor, Leon Mirell  
*Associate Producer:* Robert Eggenweiler  
*Production Executive:* James Margellos  
*Assistant Director:* Charles Wasserman  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Graeme Clifford  
*Screenplay:* Gillian Freeman  
*From the novel by:* Richard Miles  
*Director of Photography:* László Kovács  
*Film Editor:* Danford B. Greene  
*Art Director:* Leon Ericksen  
*Assistant Art Director:* Cam Porteous \*  
*Property Master:* Peter Young  
*Wardrobe:* Ilse Richter  
*Make-up:* Phyllis Newman  
*Hairstylist:* Salli Bailey  
*Music:* Johnny Mandel  
*Music Editing by:* Synchrofilm Inc.  
*Sound:* John H.W. Gusselle  
*Additional Post-production [new frame]:* Paragon Films  
*Paragon (Producer):* Don Hulette  
*Paragon (Supervisor):* Ronald Stein  
*Studio:* Panorama Studios

**Cast:**  
Sandy Dennis (*Frances Austen*)  
Michael Burns (*the boy*)  
Susanne Benton (*Nina*)  
John Garfield Jr (*Nick*)  
Luana Anders (*Sylvia*)  
Edward Greenhalgh (*Dr Charles Stevenson*)  
Doris Buckingham (*Mrs Ebury*)  
Frank Wade (*Mr Ebury*)  
Alicia Ammon (*Mrs Pitt*)  
Rae Brown (*Mrs Parnell*)  
Lloyd Berry (*Mr Parnell*)  
Linda Sorensen (*prostitute*)  
Michael Murphy (*the rounder*)

Canada/USA 1969  
110 mins

\* Uncredited

Restored 35mm print courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.  
Restoration funded by The Film Foundation and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association.

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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

The Long Goodbye

Wed 2 Jun 14:30; Sat 19 Jun 17:30

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

3 Women

Sat 5 Jun 20:30; Thu 10 Jun 20:30; Sat 19 Jun 15:00

Streamers

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

The James Dean Story

Mon 7 Jun 20:50

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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