



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

A Perfect Couple

Not uncharacteristically of Altman, *A Perfect Couple* grew out of the jetsam of his professional life: in this case, a desire to further explore Paul Dooley and Marta Heflin (who had played small parts in *A Wedding*), and to extend his collaboration with Allan Nicholls (a songwriter who had co-scripted *A Wedding*, but who was also the creator of the pop group Keepin' 'Em off the Streets which was revived to play a focal role here). Also not uncharacteristically, these elements are mixed into a popular formula which Altman then, as in *A Wedding* and *Quintet*, proceeds to complicate if not actually to subvert. To all intents and purposes, therefore, *A Perfect Couple* is a remake of *Marty*, with the pair of lonely hearts kept isolated not by their physical unattractiveness so much as by their irreconcilable backgrounds, and winning through to a kind of loving by way of a series of heart-warming and doggily funny mishaps.

More interesting (and more the real subject of the film) is the formal expression Altman gives to these backgrounds. Like Papa Theodopoulos, who regiments his family in every detail of their public and private lives, Teddy (the leader of Keepin' 'Em off the Streets) maintains strict discipline, imposing fines and refusing to allow defections from rehearsals, always insisting that the group – like the Theodopoulos family – must be a unit. Teddy, however, is concerned with the harmonies produced by his unit, while Papa Theodopoulos insists only that the right notes be struck. Free to behave as they will off-stage, the members of Keepin' 'Em off the Streets are accorded the same liberty on stage, provided they attune to the desired harmony (one singer, for instance, turns aside to nurse or play with her baby when not required at the microphone); and the camera movements recording both rehearsals and performances are imbued with a sense of warm, sinuous grace. By contrast, the Theodopoulos family, forbidden any deviation, are always on stage, drilled into movements as mechanical as a chorus line as they troop Indian file into the dining room, or along the corridors of the family antique emporium in the wake of their patriarch; and the sense of the camera here is sharp, edgy, stilted.

The difficulty is that the strategy reduces the Greek family to little more than puppets, so that Altman's critical comparison between two worlds goes for very little. But given the exquisitely classical simplicity with which the pop numbers are staged (against a cyclorama with projected moon, and gaunt metallic tree as sole prop), the happy ending which engineers a cosy alliance between Keepin' 'Em off the Streets and the Los Angeles Philharmonic is more than a mere pirouette. Without necessarily making musical comparisons, Altman has evoked a vitality in pop and a validity in audience reactions to it which comment adversely on the formally reverential hush with which Papa Theodopoulos requires his family to pay homage to classical pops, and which suggest that both cultures can learn profitably from each other.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1979

A Perfect Couple is based on a cultural opposition which turns out to be curiously affectless, a mechanism for generating the comedy that has little resonance in itself. Alex Theodopoulos (Paul Dooley), the eldest son of an old-

world Greek family that maintains strict patriarchal decorum in present-day Los Angeles, their lives devoted to classical music and a large antique emporium, meets Sheila Shea (Marta Heflin), a singer with the pop group 'Keepin' 'Em off the Streets', through an audio-visual dating agency, Great Expectations. Their romance, diffident on her part, earnestly companionable on his, is hindered by the similar demands of their very different worlds: much time is spent establishing how they are both dominated by rituals and schedules.

The first thing to note about this confection is that its Altmanesque features are more illusory than real. The conception of the film seems to have been a typically wayward process, born of Altman's desire to pair Dooley and Heflin (whom he had liked in small parts in *A Wedding*) and his collaboration with Allan Nicholls, songwriter and music impresario (Altman actor in *Nashville*, *Buffalo Bill* and co-writer of *A Wedding*), and creator of Keepin' 'Em off the Streets a year or so before their reconstitution for *A Perfect Couple*. Rather like the 'real' political campaign that was set rolling in *Nashville*, Altman launched the group with all the trappings of an actual press party, which then became a scene in the film; and like the musical accompaniment to *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, Nicholls' original songs for the group pre-dated the film, but were seen to have an integral relationship to its story. But if such circumstances suggest the ideal setting for a typically Altman set of interactions, it is a surprise to discover that *A Perfect Couple* is bound more by plot – though of an ironic, light-hearted, almost Lubitschian kind. The course of true love is principally smoothed by another couple, who dance peripherally and (until the very end) quite blissfully through the film, dropping connections that once or twice cause the main characters to exclaim 'Kismet'. Even the humour is less chaotic à la *Nashville* or *Buffalo Bill*, and more deliberately inconsequential, à la *MASH*.

Such qualities may make the film sound, in the context of Altman's work, sadly retrogressive. But to an extent, they supply it with an honest basis in sentiment and generic convention, and shore it against the bad faith of something like *A Wedding*, which pretends to a sophistication beyond its capricious narrative that it can never really bring itself to define. What, however, is disheartening about *A Perfect Couple* is that the various kinds of 'performance' it juxtaposes – classical and pop music; old-world formality and contemporary indeterminacy (both social and sexual) – never become significant tensions, as they do, say, in the anxieties of Buffalo Bill, Essex's baffled quest [in *Quintet*], and even (in more abstract terms) the changes in coloration of the three women [from *3 Women*]. Since he detached himself from Hollywood's established forms and meanings, Altman has consistently worried over how his fictional performances might be weighed against 'reality'. It is an odd and inevitably naive preoccupation, but one which is central to the way Altman sees his work as a many-handed enterprise whose aim is to reproduce the ambiguity of each spectator's experience. In the least of his films (*Nashville*, *A Wedding*), he hopefully resolves the problem by blurring the distinction between the two; in the more rigorous (*Buffalo Bill*, *3 Women*, *Quintet*), squaring the world with men's fictions looks more of a Sisyphean task. In this sequence, *A Perfect Couple* is a curious dead spot, which raises the problem in a way that allows Altman to close most of his mind to it, and so effect the facile harmony of the closing musical number.

Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1979

A PERFECT COUPLE

Director: Robert Altman
©: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Production Company: Lion’s Gate Films
Presented by: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Executive Producer: Tommy Thompson
Producer: Robert Altman
Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler, Scott Bushnell
Project Co-ordinator: Victoria Barney
Project Auditor: Dick Dubuque
Post-production: Lion’s Gate Sound
Production Assistant: Elaine diBello Bradish
1st Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
2nd Assistant Director: Bill Cosentino
Script Supervisor: Luca Kouimelis
Written by: Robert Altman, Allan Nicholls
Director of Photography: Edmond L. Koons
Lighting (Keepin’ ‘Em off the Streets): Charlie Anderson
Camera Operator: Jan Keisser
Camera Assistants: Cal Roberts, Rick Mention
Gaffer: Randy Glass
Key Grip: Tom Prophet Jr
Special Effects: Tom Fisher
Editor: Tony Lombardo
Assistant Editors: Raja R. Gosnell, Eric Whitfield
Set Designer (Keepin’ ‘Em Off the Streets): Leon Ericksen
Property Master: Steve Altman
Costumes (Keepin’ ‘Em off the Streets): Anna Vilms
Wardrobe: Beth Alexander
Make-up: Tom Tuttle
Hairstylist: Jerry Turnage
Title Design: Patrice Ryan
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Colour Timer: Bob Hagans
Music Produced by: Allan Nicholls
Music Editor: Ted Whitfield
Music Recordist: Dave Palmer
Sound: Robert Gravenor, Don Merritt
Re-recording: Richard Portman
Sound Editors: David Horton, Sam Gemette
Negative Editor: Jack Hooper
Road Manager (Keepin’ ‘Em off the Streets): Greg Mulgrew
Roadie (Keepin’ ‘Em off the Streets): Jim Kunellis

Cast:

Paul Dooley (Alex Theodopoulos)
Marta Heflin (Sheila Shea)
Titos Vandis (Panos Theodopoulos)
Belita Moreno (Eleousa Theodopoulos)
Henry Gibson (Fred Bott)
Dimitra Arliss (Athena)
Allan Nicholls (Dana ‘115’)
Ann Ryerson (Skye ‘147’)
Poppy Lagos (Melpomeni Bott)
Dennis Franz (Costa)
Margery Bond (Wilma)
Mona Golabek (Mona)
Terry Wills (Ben)
Susan Blakeman (Penelope Bott)
Melanie Bishop (Star)
Fred Bier (the imperfect husband)
Jette Seear (the imperfect wife)
Ted Neeley (Teddy)
Heather Macrae (Mary)
Tomi-Lee Bradley (Sydney-Ray)
Steven Sharp (Bobbi)
Tony Berg (lead guitar/musical director)
Craig Doerge (keyboards)
Jeff Eyrich (bass guitar)
David Luell (saxophone)
Butch Sandford (guitar)
Art Wood (drums)
Ren Woods (special guest appearance)
Tom Pierson (conductor of LA Philharmonic Orchestra)
Mona Golabek (piano soloist)

USA 1979©
111 mins

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