



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

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

The director of *Nashville*, *A Wedding*, *The Perfect Couple* is dead. Long live the director of *3 Women*, *Quintet* – and *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*. Well, not exactly... In the steady to and fro that has become the pattern of his work in recent years, Robert Altman is about to move from the becalmed, interior-motivated spaces of *5 & Dime* back into the scampering, other-directed territory of *Nashville* – an area where he has undoubtedly found most of his critical kudos. The only connection between *5 & Dime* and his new film, *OC & Stiggs*, is that they both take place in desert climes. Altman is currently in Arizona, shooting a script by two of the editors of the *National Lampoon* (was the director of *MASH* destined to pass through the precincts of *Animal House*?), concerning two youngsters who, in Altman's words, 'decide that they shouldn't listen to anything their parents or teachers tell them, because they might grow up to be like them.' The eponymous heroes are played by two unknowns, but the older generation is represented by the likes of Ray Walston, Paul Dooley, Jane Curtain, Tina Louise – and Dennis Hopper ('he'll be playing the character he played in *Apocalypse Now*'). Apart from that, the game at stake will be one of those open-ended affairs in which Altman always seems at his most accessible while remaining most elusive. 'We're dealing with what we find here, rather than what we have created.'

Since *5 & Dime*, in fact, Altman has already shot another film, *Streamers*, again based on a play (by David Rabe), and again an echt theatrical microcosm (an army barrack room, rife with sexual, racial and generational conflict). Once more, Altman seems to have made a point of preserving the unreal claustrophobia on film. 'I didn't open it up. It's all in one set, and I never let the camera out of the barracks.' More than that, he would seem to have found a second life as a film director through the theatre. In 1981, after *Popeye* – for all its comic strip/folk hero appeal, one of the hermetically sealed/community apart Altmans – he sold his Lion's Gate studio in Los Angeles and moved to New York to form Sandcastle 5 productions. Since then, he has been strictly a stager and transcriber of theatre, first presenting two one-act plays by Frank South (*Precious Blood* and *Rattlesnake in a Cooler*) then Ed Graczyk's *5 & Dime*, before taping all three for cable television (*5 & Dime* was shot for \$800,000 on Super-16mm equipment that would also allow theatrical 35mm prints to be struck).

Richard Corliss' account of the stage and tape versions of the three plays in *Film Comment* (January/February, 1983) tantalisingly suggests how central they may be to an Altman whose forte is dealing with multiple characters within a minimal cast, and not in a more literal one-to-one relationship. The fact that Corliss finds the plays so difficult to accommodate ('Those who look for the more obvious Altman trademarks in either the stage or the cable versions of these plays will be disappointed') may have a lot to do with the

conventional wisdom about Altman that is applied ('[his] characteristic films were big parties; everyone was promised a fair hearing, though not all could be clearly heard'). But description alone of *Rattlesnake in a Cooler*, 'the sidwinding autobiography of a down-and-out Kentucky physician (Leo Burmester) whose itch to hit the road west mixed him up with some bad company,' suggests that there are more ways than one to stage a big party. 'Burmester – a chunky, runty guy with the ricochet moves of an ageing wide receiver and more character voices than Mel Blanc's put together – makes South's menagerie of rednecks come alive ...'

The two South plays were staged first for the Los Angeles Actors' Theatre and then at Saint Clements Church in Manhattan; *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* was Altman's first Broadway production. He describes the urge to put the latter on film very much in terms of the theatrical experience. 'I was standing backstage one night watching the play and realised there were things on those actresses' faces which the audience couldn't see.' The possible connections with his other films, with *3 Women*, for instance? 'It's something I saw afterwards; I didn't see it while I was doing it. But the play was never meant to be realistic, there was a strong suggestion that this place wasn't even there, that it existed only in their minds and in our minds. It has to do with living your life through somebody else's life – what happens when the circus comes to town and then leaves?' On the subject of truth and illusion, fame and its shadow, Altman claims no special interest in James Dean himself (about whom he made a documentary in 1957). 'In fact, when I first saw the title of the play, I nearly sent it back.' Interestingly, in terms of the reputation of the *Nashville* films as roadshows of the real, Altman refers disparagingly to that solitary essay in biography as a 'pseudo-documentary'.

Permutations of the real and the unreal, of lives and half-lives, circulate round the actual staging of *5 & Dime* – and the technique for splitting its action into two complementary time zones. In the theatre, to establish the division of the stage between 1955 and 1975, 'we created the illusion of a mirrored wall and used doubles at the beginning of the play.' On film, the illusions were all real: a two-way mirror divided a set of the five and dime in 1975 from a second, reversed set for 1955. Shifts from one to the other were accomplished with computer-controlled lighting. 'We had no opticals in the film at all, it was all done mechanically.' Critical reception of both play and film conjures another set of reflections. Altman describes the play as an out-of-town success that took a critical drubbing on Broadway (prompting, it seems, something of a falling out with playwright Graczyk), which was then picked up in New York reviews of the film. Two champions of the latter, however, have inexplicably referred it back to that Other Altman: according to *Variety*, it is 'the filmmaker's most accessible and enjoyable film since *Nashville*'; and to Pauline Kael, 'his touch seems as sure here as it was wobbly in most of the pictures he has made since *Nashville*.'

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1983

COME BACK TO THE 5 & DIME JIMMY DEAN, JIMMY DEAN

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Companies: MG Cable Productions, Viacom Enterprises
Production Company: Sandcastle 5 Productions
Presented by: Mark Goodson
Executive Producer: Giraud Chester
Producer: Scott Bushnell
Production Executive: Peter Newman
Production Co-ordinator: Doug Cole
Production Manager: Sonja Webster
Assistant Director: Sonja Webster
2nd Assistant Director: Marlene Arvan
Screenplay and original play: Ed Graczyk
Director of Photography: Pierre Mignot
Assistant Photographers: Robert Reed Altman, Jean Lépine
Camera Operator: Michael Levine
Editor: Jason Rosenfield
Assistant Editors: Diane Asnes, Celeste Hines, Gina Roose
Production Designer: David Gropman
Set Decorator/Props: Stephen Altman
Costumes: Scott Bushnell
Wardrobe: Greg Fauss, Ben Wilson
Make-up: David Craig Forrest
Titles: Optical House
Sound Recording: Franklin Stettner, Keith Gardner
Sound Re-recording: Dick Vorisek, Trans/Audio
Sound Editors: Robert Q. Lovett, Al Nahmias
Technical Director: Jack Chandler

Cast:

Sandy Dennis (Mona)
Cher (Sissy)
Karen Black (Joanne)
Sudie Bond (Juanita)
Kathy Bates (Stella Mae)
Marta Heflin (Edna Louise)
Mark Patton (Joe)
Caroline Aaron (Martha)
Ruth Miller (Clarissa)
Gena Ramsel (Sue Ellen)
Ann Risley (Phyllis Marie)
Dianne Turley Travis (Alice Ann)

USA 1982©
109 mins

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

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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

That Cold Day in the Park

Tue 8 Jun 18:00

OC & Stiggs

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

M*A*S*H

Thu 10 Jun 18:00; Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40

A Wedding

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

Images

Sat 12 Jun 15:30; Fri 25 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

Brewster McCloud

Sun 13 Jun 16:00; Fri 18 Jun 17:50

A Perfect Couple

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

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

The Long Goodbye

Sat 19 Jun 17:30

California Split

Sun 20 Jun 15:40; Thu 24 Jun 14:30

McCabe & Mrs Miller

Sun 20 Jun 18:30

Beyond Therapy

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

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