



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Buffalo Bill and the Indians

In the preface to his play *Indians*, on which Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* is loosely based, Arthur Kopit notes how, during rewritings between the London and Broadway openings, he evolved from John Ford parody towards nightmare: 'This, again, was what I had always wanted. To create an impression. Not something didactic, but something musically amorphous, and viscerally disturbing, like a bad dream – to be thought about, after it's all over. Pieced together again, like a puzzle.'

Curiously, this serves better as a description of Altman's film than of the play, partly because Kopit never quite surmounted the problem of how to make the nightmare not only Buffalo Bill's (as he is gradually forced to face the extent to which he has allowed truth to be papered over by myth) but the audience's. By using as the still centre of Buffalo Bill's mental storm a reconstruction of the U.S. Commission's visit to Standing Rock in 1886 – a parley which resulted directly in the takeover of the Great Sioux Reservation for the benefit of white settlers, and indirectly in the assassination of Sitting Bull and the massacre at Wounded Knee four years later – Kopit in fact reduces nightmare to all-too-understandable logic. 'Ya see,' says Buffalo Bill in an effort to expound the Indians' apparently surrealistic logic to the Senators, 'the Indian believes the earth is sacred and sees ploughin' as a sacrilegious act.' Revealing the red man's ingrained philosophical and territorial beliefs, and matching them against the white's expansionist needs, these scenes simply demonstrate how, in the circumstances, the twain could never hope to meet.

Altman tackles the problem rather differently, by deliberately decentralising any question of the reality of the Indian. As the camera pulls back at the beginning of the film to reveal that the ferocious redskin attack on a pioneer shack is merely a rehearsal for one of the Wild West Show's acts, a wounded Indian extra trampled by a horse is hurried away. Subsequently, as the film bustles into the characteristic Altman flurry of sidelong jokes and overlapping dialogue while the Wild West Show marshals its characters and resources, an enigmatic shot of Indians silhouetted against the forest is laconically explained as the funeral of the dead extra before it is swallowed up by the kaleidoscopic action, leaving no ripple behind. A single Ford set-up of a pioneer burial carries an automatic charge; but this, the film implies, is alien to our culture, our understanding, our emotions.

From this point on, *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* becomes a confrontation of myth with myth. And exactly as the reception committee waiting to welcome the new guest star to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show is deceived into ignoring the meekly undersized Sitting Bull (Frank Kaquitts) in favour of his gigantic interpreter William Halsey (Will Sampson), so the audience is lured into accepting the image it expects. Massive, impassive, and every inch the fearsome Geronimo of imagination, Halsey (a fictional character replacing the John Grass of history and Kopit's play) takes the part of the proud, noble savage currently worshipped. Authorised to speak throughout for the world-weary Sitting Bull, he logic-chops the opposition to ribbons at every tum, whether provoking Buffalo Bill (Paul Newman) into displays of arrogant white superiority or picking historical holes in the hilariously inept scenario for the Little Big Horn playlet. Halsey's persona as the image created by white guilt is

given a savage twist when, after Sitting Bull's death, he is seen committing the final betrayal of impersonating his Chief in the gladiatorial combat in which Buffalo Bill contemptuously vanquishes his enemy.

Sitting Bull himself, meanwhile, is presented as an amusing primitive uninterested by the great debates going on around him, instead taking a simple-minded interest in the workings of a music-box or a senile delight in demonstrating that Buffalo Bill uses buckshot to facilitate his sharpshooting act. In fact, however, what his behaviour displays is simply a common, unheroic humanity. 'He wanted to show the truth to the people for once,' cries Annie Oakley (Geraldine Chaplin), threatening to resign because Buffalo Bill refuses to change his Little Big Horn scenario to show that the massacre was provoked by an attack ordered by Custer on squaws and children in the Indian camp. But it is Halsey who proposes this rewrite in Sitting Bull's name, to the accompaniment of a spine-chilling chant, while Sitting Bull pursues the business of living with calm, unquenchable curiosity. A point undemonstratively echoed by the distant mountains, first seen in the film's opening image as the camera pans down from them to the American flag raised over the Wild West Show's stockade, and thereafter omnipresent as a sort of Shangri La beyond the land across the river to which Sitting Bull retreats with his people to escape the confines of the Wild West Show. By a happy coincidence (or perhaps calculation), since the film was shot on an Indian reservation in Alberta, these mountains are the ones Sitting Bull must have seen when, in 1877, less interested in continuing to fight or set records straight than in being left in peace to hunt buffalo, he led his people into Canada, only to return four years later for imprisonment, exile and death because neither the Great White Father nor the Great Mother who ruled Canada could see his point of view.

So while the two myths confront each other in the centre of the film's arena, finally achieving the resolution obligatory today in the (deliberately unconvincing) scene where Buffalo Bill is haunted by the ghost of the Indian he betrayed, another nightmare is quietly adumbrated in the more genuinely haunting mysteries never explained by the film, and which gradually knit together to form a subtext in which the Indian acquires a strange magical-religious property: the mysterious river-crossing no one ever sees performed but which leaves Sitting Bull as high and dry as Christ walking on the waters; the moment when Sitting Bull and six followers vanish into the mountains, afterwards smilingly telling Buffalo Bill's baffled posse only that it was 'the first moon of the month'; the sudden zoom in to Sitting Bull's funeral pyre to reveal, among the bones, ashes and beads, what looks uncommonly like a Christian cross; and above all, the enigmatic theatricality of Sitting Bull's appearance in the Wild West Show when he first stuns the audience by levelling his gun at President Cleveland, then manoeuvres his horse into the dance promised as the climax to his act.

In an election year, and with its echoes of *Nashville*, the levelled gun has obvious connotations, fulfilling the expectations of a counterculture nourished on the Wounded Knee demonstration and the welter of literature about Indian genocide currently flooding the bookshops. But what of that mysterious dance by the horse, mockingly accompanied by a Mozart minuet as the circus music fades away and President Cleveland mulishly refuses to accept the meeting foretold in Sitting Bull's dream?

According to Indian belief at the time, the old grey which was said to have embarked alone upon its repertoire of tricks after Sitting Bull was shot dead,

was in fact performing the Dance of the Ghosts. As much as anything, it was this Ghost Dance religion, newly disseminated by the Paiute Messiah, which led to the extermination of the Sioux at Wounded Knee: partly because the white men feared that the secret ceremonies of the Ghost Dance would unite the Indian tribes (Sitting Bull's disappearance in the mountains) and because it blasphemed in taking over Christ from Christianity (the cross among the ashes); and partly because the Indians believed that no further struggle was necessary. 'In the next springtime, when the grass was knee high, the earth would be covered with new soil which would bury all the white men, and new land would be covered with sweet grass and running water and trees ... The Indians who danced the Ghost Dance would be taken up in the air and suspended there while a wave of new earth was passing, and then they would be set down among the ghosts of their ancestors on the new earth, where only Indians would live.' (Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*).

'History is no more than disrespect for the dead,' says white surrogate William Halsey, interpreting a Sitting Bull plea for a reversal of historical guilts and responsibilities which even Buffalo Bill notices that Sitting Bull never actually uttered. Sitting Bull's History Lesson is an altogether more nightmarish threat: no less than obliteration of the white man's civilisation, traditions, and even existence.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1976

BUFFALO BILL AND THE INDIANS

OR SITTING BULL'S HISTORY LESSON

Director: Robert Altman

©: Dino De Laurentiis Corporation

Production Companies: Dino De Laurentiis Corporation, Lion's Gate Films, Talent Associates, Norton Simon Inc.

Executive Producer: David Susskind

Producer: Robert Altman

Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler, Scott Bushnell, Jac Cashin

Production Executive: Tommy Thompson

Unit Manager: Les Kimber

Researcher: Maysie Hoy

Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson

2nd Assistant Director: Rob Lockwood

Script Supervisor: John Binder

Screenplay: Alan Rudolph, Robert Altman

Screen Story: Alan Rudolph, Robert Altman

Suggested by the play *Indians* by: Arthur Kopit

Director of Photography: Paul Lohmann

Camera Operators: Eddie Koons, Jack Richards

Grip: Art Brooker

Gaffer: J. Michael Marlett

Special Effects: Joe Zomar, Logan Frazee, Bill Zomar, Terry Frazee, John Thomas

Editors: Peter Appleton, Dennis Hill

Assistant Editors: Tony Lombardo, Tom Walls

Production Designer: Tony Masters

Art Director: Jack Maxsted

Set Decorator/Property Master: Dennis J. Parrish

Assistant Set Decorator/Property Master: Graham Sumner

Costume Designer: Anthony Powell

Buffalo Bill's Gun Belt by: John Bianchi

Make-up: Monty Westmore

Title Design: Dan Perri

Music Composer: Richard Baskin

Sound: Jim Webb, Chris McLaughlin

Sound System: Lion's Gate Sound

Titan Boom: Norman Walke

Re-recording Mixer: Richard Portman

Sound Editors: William Sawyer, Richard Oswald

Research: Maysie Hoy

Head Wrangler: John Scott

Cast:

Paul Newman (*William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody, the star*)

Joel Grey (*Nate Salsbury, the producer*)

Kevin McCarthy (*Major John M. Burke, the publicist*)

Harvey Keitel (*Ed Goodman, the nephew*)

Allan Nicholls (*Prentiss Ingraham, the journalist*)

Geraldine Chaplin (*Annie Oakley, the sure shot*)

John Considine (*Frank Butler, the sure shot's manager*)

Robert DoQui (*Osborne Dart, the wrangler*)

Michael Kaplan (*Jules Keen, the treasurer*)

Bert Remsen (*Crutch, the bartender*)

Bonnie Leaders (*Margaret, the mezzo-contralto*)

Noelle Rogers (*Lucille Du Charmers, the lyric-contralto*)

Evelyn Lear (*Nina Cavalini, the lyric-soprano*)

Denver Pyle (*McLaughlin, the Indian agent*)

Frank Kaquitts (*Chief Sitting Bull, the Indian*)

Will Sampson (*William Halsey, the interpreter*)

Ken Krossa (*Johnny Baker, the arenic director*)

Fred N. Larsen (*Buck Taylor, the king of the cowboys*)

Jerri Duce, Joy Duce (*the cowboy trick riders*)

Alex Green (*Munoz, the Mexican whip & fast draw act*)

Gary MacKenzie (*Manuel, the Mexican whip & fast draw act*)

Pat McCormick (*Grover Cleveland, US president*)

Shelley Duvall (*Frances Folsom Cleveland, the wife*)

Burt Lancaster (*Ned Buntline, the legend maker*)

Humphrey Gratz (*the old soldier*)*

E.L. Doctorow (*O.W. Fizician, the speech writer*)*

Pluto Calcedona (*Brigham the horse*)*

USA 1976©

123 mins

* Uncredited

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

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

Thieves like Us

Tue 8 Jun 20:30; Mon 21 Jun 17:50

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

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

Sat 19 Jun 12:30

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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