



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Streamers

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

Although the after-glow of *MASH* and *Nashville* (abetted by some purblind critical activity) still clouds the issue, it seems increasingly obvious that Altman's key film is *Quintet*. Not that it changed the course of his career, but that it crystallised a tendency which might now be traced back through *3 Women* and *Images* as far as the frozen otherworldliness of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. Actually *Quintet* – for all that it takes place in a landscape that is unnameable, uninhabitable, virtually unimaginable – may not be worlds away from *Nashville*; it is filmmaking as a board game where the latter is a bandwagon, both having to do with characters whose meaning is collective, who define themselves through public events. What separates them (and the other films in the Altman canon which they represent) is a matter of dramatic honesty and imaginative possibility. *Nashville* sets up public events (a campaign, a concert, an assassination) whose significance is both flaunted and denied in the characteristically flattened perspectives of the Altman zoom; having presented the audience with a loaded proposition, Altman would have it mean whatever they think it means (much as, in interviews, he throws questions of interpretation back on the questioner). In *Quintet*, events are robbed of all significance before characters come to grips with them, leaving the communal experience to be defined more through metaphor and allegory – which in this case might be Altman's most direct confession of feeling about filmmakers, audiences, interviewers, et al.

The point is that the multiplicity and busyness of the *Nashville* films is actually constricting – closer to the expressly mathematical treatment of character in *Catch-22* than the generosity of Renoir's 'everyone has his reasons'. The *Quintet* films – because they don't begin from a reality that pre-dates, pre-empts, then retrospectively justifies the fictional world – pursue a higher mathematics: the mutation of unknown forms rather than the multiplication of given factors. In a way, the most extreme of them is not even *Quintet* but *Popeye*, which manages magnificently to create its own reality out of something as unreal as a comic strip. Given the film's poor reception, it is not surprising that Altman first took a sabbatical from the cinema, then found a radical shorthand way of getting the abstraction-in-reality of *Popeye* without the laborious construction of Sweethaven – via the theatre. The ladies who traded traumas in a dematerialised Texas in *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* gave Altman his most fantastically mutable world and probably his best film. But the success of that film actually makes it rather hard to judge *Streamers* which, as a stage adaptation, is close enough to *5 & Dime* to look like a corollary to it, but is also less outrageous and more intricate, and therefore not as open to other permutations.

It certainly packs in as many traumas per square inch as *5 & Dime*, and a climax in which two of the six principals are messily done to death. But the dramatic looseness of Ed Graczyk's play, its chronological toing and froing, became a very fluid medium, favouring other kinds of growth; David Rabe marshals his traumas in stricter military order towards a final vision of horror. The theatrical voice predominates here, where the theatrical experience itself in *5 & Dime* gave Altman his theme of life as a communal illusion. The same

theme might well be extracted from *Streamers*: what provokes the final bloodletting is the psychic disruption (with its social and economic component) that is spread by Carlyle, the unassimilated, dispossessed member of this military fraternity, when he invades the barracks of the three rookies who have warily accommodated themselves within the military arena (or 'area', that strictly defined living space which Roger, in particular, is keen on keeping clean and tidy). The same bloodletting, albeit emotional, followed on Karen Black's intrusion into the sorority of the Disciples of James Dean.

Altman, perhaps, has managed not so much to expand on Rabe's play as to shift it slightly. The curious thing about the play's anger over the falsehoods of the barrack-room life is that so much of it seems to fall on the teasing of the not-quite-closet-gay character, Richie. It is his game-playing that serves as a lightning rod to Carlyle's murderous despair and Billy's repressed resentments – his flirtatiousness, a role switching not yet as achieved as Karen Black's, that brings the others up against their lack of alternatives. Richie now seems less the focus, or the scapegoat, for all their anger, perhaps because Altman has found his way to the communal illusion: that by being together they will become something different from what they all are individually – soldiers, even. Hence Altman's own comment on the subject – 'I took the point of view that there should be no leading character. That each of those four boys was as important as the other. And I defy anybody to tell me who the play was about specifically' – and hence the emphasis on storytelling, reminiscences spun by many of the characters out of some sense of incompleteness. So much concerted talk is the essence of the new theatrical Altman, a counter-trend to the buzz of indistinct, overlapping dialogue that was once seen as the essence of his cinema.

Streamers is also something of a countertrend to *5 & Dime* – and to other films like it, such as *Images* and *3 Women* – in its all-male cast, a return to a theatrical form which to some extent *5 & Dime* was parodying. The most direct result of this is a sense of stasis rather than of transformation. Altman may have democratically equated his four young recruits, but they don't share the same organically interchangeable characteristics of their female counterparts. This, of course, is the play's case against the military – the only interaction that is possible is a literal bloodletting, self or other inflicted – but to the extent that it is driving to make a point, Altman's *mise-en-scène* is also held in check. His camera as fluidly explores this staging area as the Texas five and dime, but never assimilates the silent, symbolical figure of another recruit who spends the film sheltering under his blanket. On the other hand, the 'frozen' quality of the drama makes this one of the most *Quintet*-like of Altman's films, from the chill wind that is the only sound apart from the clap of rifle drill in the credit sequence of silhouetted soldiers going through their routines, to the final track back through the devastated barrack room. He also plays one or two cryptically symbolic counters, like the girl in red (the only female) glimpsed occasionally through the barracks window, and the red 'canopy' – invoking the unopened parachutes, 'streamers', of the sergeants' theme song, 'The sky is above me, but no canopy' – with which that final track ends. And the closing dramatic coup hints that this might be a world as metaphorically topsy-turvy as that of *3 Women*: the MPs and doctors who rush in to apprehend the guilty and clean up the mess are boys no older than the central quartet.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1984

STREAMERS

Director: Robert Altman
Production Company: Streamers International Distributors
Executive Producers: Robert Michael Geisler, John Roberdeau
Producers: Robert Altman, Nick J. Mileti
Associate Producer: Scott Bushnell
Production Manager: Allan Nicholls
Production Co-ordinator: Doug Cole
Assistant Directors: Allan Nicholls, Ned Dowd
Screenplay and original play: David Rabe
Director of Photography: Pierre Mignot
Assistant Photographers: Jean Lépine, Robert Reed Altman
Editor: Norman Smith
Assistant Editor: Juliet Weber
Production Designer: Wolf Kroeger
Art Director: Steve Altman
Set Dresser: Robert Brown
Costume Designer: Scott Bushnell
Wardrobe: Bill Edwards
Title Design: Dan Perri
Opticals: The Optical House
Sound Recording: John Pritchett
Sound Re-recording: Dick J. Vorisek, Trans/Audio
Sound Editors: Paul Freedman, Leslie Topping, Nancy Attas, Ken Eluto
Title Sequence: Major Jim Brackenridge and the Sam Houston Rifles
Studio: Studios at Las Colinas Building One

Cast

Matthew Modine (*William ‘Billy’ Wilson*)
Michael Wright (*Carlyle*)
Mitchell Lichtenstein (*Richard ‘Richie’ Douglas*)
David Alan Grier (*Roger Hicks*)
Guy Boyd (*Sergeant Rooney*)
George Dzundza (*Sergeant Cokes*)
Albert Macklin (*Martin*)
B.J. Cleveland (*Pfc. Bush*)
Bill Allen (*Lieutenant Townsend*)
Paul Lazar (*MP Lieutenant*)
Phil Ward (*MP Sergeant Kilick*)
Terry McIlvain (*orderly*)
Todd Savell (*MP Sergeant Savio*)
Mark Fickert (*Dr Banes*)
Dustye Winniford (*staff sergeant*)
Robert S. Reed (*MP*)

USA 1983
118 mins

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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

3 Women

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

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

Fool for Love

Sat 12 Jun 20:40

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

Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson

Sat 26 Jun 15:10

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