



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Secret Honor

Altman on 'Secret Honor'

I'm interested in the complexity – or the simplicity, I should say – of American politics, power politics. And I do have a political conscience. But I didn't approach this as a political piece; I took it as art, as a play. My feeling is that it's truthful if not factual. Obviously, if you took the political away from it, it would be very thin. But I'm not interested in saying that this did or didn't happen. I think that the piece talks about the White House, the job, rather than the facts of history.

If this were just about Nixon, I don't think it would be anything. That's what I don't like about all these one-man plays: *Give 'Em Hell Harry*, for instance, where they're 'doing' Truman. When I first saw the play of *Secret Honor*, I kept thinking about Kennedy, who was the big hero of all the people who didn't like Nixon. But I tried to think of how often Kennedy sat in his room, knowing that there were certain things inside his brain which he couldn't tell another living soul. That was the specific thought that kicked me over into doing this. Because I would be a lot happier if I hadn't done it. I've spent a lot of time and money on it; it has been a terrible uphill battle, and I know ultimately that it's going to succeed only on a very minor level. Which is all it should. It may be valuable in that someone else might say, we should talk about so and so in these terms, and that could start a whole trend that will far exceed anything I've done. It's using what intrigues you and applying the same rules or scale to other people and events.

Everything in the play comes from things that Nixon has written, or that have been written about him. The letter to his mother, for instance, is factual. But you could take anyone – the good man, the bad man, the famous man, the infamous man, the obscure man – and you could get all the information about him that you want, and he could give it to you freely or you could use pliers on his fingernails, and you still wouldn't get an accurate picture. So you're not talking about a man, but about a phenomenon. And generally, the men who are drawn into politics are like that. They have to be masters in the art of compromise and disguise and serving other people's interests. But those aren't the people they say they are serving. I think Reagan's a far worse human being in that respect than Nixon.

In terms of the research, there are a lot of things in there that I don't even know about. I'm still surprised to discover that there are certain lines in the play that are direct quotes of Nixon's. The harpsichord music that is playing on the tape at the beginning is something that the director, Robert Harders, and the actor, Philip Baker Hall, wanted. I don't know if it's something that was a preference of Nixon's. Philip and Bob were responsible for the authorship a lot, they gave it a shape. Philip plays the piano, in fact he has

built a harpsichord and he builds guitars. He really knows more about the play than I do, he's very intelligent about it. He says he looks at the whole thing as one sentence, and he has to balance it as one sentence.

I cut a lot from the play. It ran over two hours when I first saw it, with an intermission. But you couldn't crank the audience up again after the break. Then we made further cuts when we shot the film. I wanted the relief of having some pauses in there, those flat times, and I wanted that long opening. The biggest problem in reaching audiences is getting over the initial hurdle – which was also my first reaction – of saying, I don't want to see another comedian doing cheap shots at Nixon. He's too easy a target. He has become a classic cartoon figure, and people were getting tired of it. After all, Gore Vidal did a play about Nixon in the early 60s, which I saw on Broadway. It was a kind of political cartoon, all slashing humour. The interesting thing I've found about *Secret Honor* is that the people who were big Nixon supporters don't hate the film at all. They've said that it just shows you what a difficult time the poor man had, and how good his intentions were. And the people who hated Nixon have said I'm not sure I like that piece, it makes him almost human. I don't think it's in any sense pro-Nixon, but I think it's good to shake people out of that real hard polarisation where he is just some kind of cardboard figure.

When we filmed the play, it was done in an actual room, not a set. It was a reception room in a women's residential hall, one of those nice old stately buildings, where the ladies could receive their young men. All we did was to redress it. I teach at the University of Michigan, and we brought the play there and made an accredited course out of it. We had five performances, then we shot it with about 15 graduate students on the crew. It crossed over a lot of academic lines, and it also kind of proved that you don't need all those high-expertise crew members to put black drapes over the windows. It was a non-union film, and I financed it completely myself. I lectured during the process, and we had television monitors outside where students could come and watch the film being made. The music was written by one of the professors and performed by the school orchestra. So it became a good test project for the kind of thing we're talking about doing there, which is giving students hands-on experience, not just theory. It was also about taking theatre to film without filming it on the stage and without having it rewritten for the screen.

I think it's better on film than on stage by a long shot. We didn't have the closed-circuit monitors on stage, and they help a great deal because they emphasise the whole idea of media participation in politics. Also the vagueness of those monitors is a little weird, I get very strange impressions. There's one point where he's getting up – he's been on his knees, doing that little dog, arf, arf – and as he gets up, on the monitor, the way he moves reminds me of a silent movie. The gun of course was in the play, but the clock was not. I put that in primarily just to get a sense of urgency, to suggest that

he has a plan. The piece works pretty much in real time, but I try to get that sense of o'clock in everything I do. I keep thinking, where's the clock?

I can never explain the reasons for the framing or composition in my films. Yet there is a pattern, it's very evident. I think it rarely comes consciously, although there are always things like the final shot of *Streamers*, where I knew exactly what I wanted to do. In fact, only twice in that film was there a conventional dolly shot, at the end and during the knife fight, and the set was designed for that. The rest of the time the camera was like on a balloon, just floating. Here the only thing I consciously recall was that I wanted to keep the camera away from the actor. I didn't want to allow the audience to look at him too closely until they had accepted him. I didn't want them saying, that doesn't look like Nixon to me. For the same reason, the beginning is awfully long and slow. I protected it a little bit so that I could always have cut it down, but I could never bring myself to do it. I wanted them to know that I wasn't going to rush this; that this is the way it is and the way it has to be perceived.

I also tried to get a kind of dark feeling in that opening, the way he is seen approaching his office on the monitors. He's very stiff and formal in the way he dresses, and the smoking jacket he puts on goes with a certain Sherlock Holmes/Christopher Lee ambience. But the décor really is quite functional; it's a sort of microcosm of his memory of what he imagined being rich, or successful, or the President, or all those things, would mean. And there's nothing comfortable in that. It comes out in the play when he talks about the law offices he saw in New York as a young man, and he recalls wood panelling, thick carpets, all that deep velvet feeling that people associate with luxury. Any time I see rooms like that I think of Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*.

Robert Altman interviewed by Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1985

SECRET HONOR

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Company: Sandcastle 5 Productions
In co-operation with:
University of Michigan Department of Communication,
Los Angeles Actors’ Theatre
Executive Producer: Scott Bushnell
Producer: Robert Altman
Associate Producer: Doug Cole
Stage Manager: John Brigleb
Post-production Co-ordinator: Matthew Seig
Production Assistants: Jack Kney, Marek Albrecht
Production Secretary: Georgia Hamlin
Associate Director: Robert Harders
Assistant Director: Allan Nicholls
Screenplay and original play: Donald Freed, Arnold M. Stone
Director of Photography: Pierre Mignot
Camera Operator: Jean Lépine
Assistant Camera: René Daigle
Gaffer: Jonathan Lumley
Electrician: Joey Forsyte
Key Grip: Tom Grunke
Grip: Harry Tracosas
Editor: Juliet Weber
Assistant Editor: Mickey Kaczorowski
Art Director: Stephen Altman
Titles/Opticals: The Optical House
Music: George Burt
Music Assistant: Preston Stahly
Music Conductor: Carl St. Clair
Sound Mixer: Andy Aaron
Boom Man: Dan Gleich
Re-recorder: Paul Coombe, Sound One
Sound Editor: Bernard Hajdenberg

Cast
Philip Baker Hall (*Richard Milhous Nixon*)

USA 1984
90 mins

35mm print courtesy of the Robert Altman Collection at the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Promotional partners



A deliciously irreverent brewing company

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Secret Honor
Wed 16 Jun 18:00; Sun 27 Jun 15:50
A Perfect Couple
Wed 16 Jun 20:45
Women in the Films of Robert Altman:
An Online Panel Discussion
Thu 17 Jun 19:00
Brewster McCloud
Fri 18 Jun 17:50
Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean
Sat 19 Jun 12:30
3 Women
Sat 19 Jun 15:00
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
Thieves like Us
Mon 21 Jun 17:50
Streamers
Mon 21 Jun 20:40
M*A*S*H
Tue 22 Jun 14:30; Mon 28 Jun 20:40
OC & Stiggs
Tue 22 Jun 18:00
A Wedding
Wed 23 Jun 14:30; Sun 27 Jun 18:10
Beyond Therapy
Thu 24 Jun 17:50; Tue 29 Jun 20:45
Images
Fri 25 Jun 18:00
Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson
Sat 26 Jun 15:10
Health
Sun 27 Jun 12:15
Popeye
Tue 29 Jun 17:50
Quintet
Wed 30 Jun 20:45



<https://planetradio.co.uk/scala-radio>

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.
We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk