



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Beyond Therapy

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

The span between the 1980 ‘catastrophe’ of *Health* and *Popeye* and the 1992 ‘comeback’ of *The Player* is often regarded as Robert Altman’s ‘wilderness years.’ In point of fact, the former are more interesting films than the latter, but in narrativising careers we leave little room for distinguishing between financial setbacks and creative accomplishments. And the noteworthy thing about these wilderness years is not that they were a negligible sidelining, but that they produced some work that was really, really wild.

Along with a venomous foray into the teen movie (*O.C. and Stiggs*, 1985), Altman’s 80s were largely occupied with forays into television (*Tanner ’88* in 1988, *Vincent & Theo* in 1990) and theatre, both directing for the stage and filming stage work. *Beyond Therapy* belongs to the last-named category, based on Christopher Durang’s off-Broadway hit, though significantly rewritten by Altman, to the displeasure of Durang, who wrote that Altman ‘throws the psychological underpinnings out the window, and people just run around acting “crazy”.’ This is not inaccurate, nor is it a demerit for those with a fondness for the screwball tradition who never worried too much about how John Barrymore and Carole Lombard in *Twentieth Century* (1934) got that way.

Here we’ve got an ensemble of zanies that fans out around a central triangular relationship consisting of Bob (Christopher Guest); his bisexual live-in boyfriend, Bruce (Jeff Goldblum); and the girl Bruce meets through a personal ad in *New York Magazine*, Prudence (Julie Hagerty, one of our finest comediennes). On their first date, Bruce sucks Prudence’s toe unbidden, and soon after proffers: ‘I was gonna take you to see a revival of *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, then home to my place for sexual intercourse?’ The rapid-fire discourse of dizzy dysfunctionals scarcely lets up from here, and what might have been a cosy yuppie comedy of manners turns into something nearer to Antonin Artaud, the aggression overlaid with a strange sweetness. (Various renditions of ‘Someone to Watch over Me’ act as the film’s theme song.) Manic and moony, it’s the film of someone with nothing left to lose, redolent of the freedom of the wilderness.

Nick Pinkerton, *Sight & Sound*, May 2020

Robert Altman’s *Beyond Therapy* ends its comedy of acting out, of private dramas that only seem to have meaning in public places, with what might be called a tourist pirouette. As the central duo, Bruce (Jeff Goldblum) and Prudence (Julie Hagerty) leave the restaurant where more acting out than

eating has been going on, talking of marriage and a trip to Paris, the camera drifts up and away from them to come to rest on the city skyline. It's one of those conventional images for signalling a happy ending, except that this skyline is not New York, as we have been led to believe, but Paris itself – with the Eiffel Tower, most conventionally but in this context most surprisingly, parked in the middle of the shot. Since we have gone in one unbroken pan from the restaurant to the cityscape, the trickery, or the joke (like falling in love, the characters only have to wish themselves in Paris, and bingo they're there), can't be in the shot itself. It's in the way the film is set up from the beginning, part of its structure and its theme.

Altman is not ambiguous about where the story is set; he deliberately leads us astray. In the first scene, Bruce is waiting outside the French restaurant, Les Bouchons, where all his and Prudence's subsequent assignations will take place, albeit under different names. She arrives a moment later, struggling out of an unmistakable New York subway, dropping the copy of New York magazine which carries the lonely hearts ad from Bruce she has answered (a passer-by picks it up; she thanks him; he calmly walks off with it). Her nervousness is not exactly allayed by the first minutes of conversation with Bruce: he tells her about the man he's currently living with, but that he's willing to consider marriage.

Added to which, their rendezvous has attracted the excited interest of a parrot-dressed woman dining upstairs. Zizi (Geneviève Page) is obviously French, but she seems to be in charge of a group of similarly vibrantly dressed American women, and when she can no longer stand what she sees going on downstairs, she leads them all out with a great deal of flapping and backtalking (no more American Express, protest the staff as they try to pay). Zizi turns out to be the mother of Bob (Christopher Guest), who is Bruce's current live-in lover, and when she tells him about this betrayal, Bob leads his whole therapy group in indignant invasion of Les Bouchons. Before this, however, many people have had recourse to their therapists. One of the waiters weeps down the phone to Charlotte (Glenda Jackson), who asks about his phoney French accent. Bruce is another of Charlotte's patients, while next door Prudence is seeing her colleague Stuart (Tom Conti), whose therapeutic style includes an aggrieved defensiveness about his own sexuality, conveyed in a thick, Italianate accent.

In one sense, what this adds up to is a conventional enough comedy in which the therapists are crazier than their patients, with all the farcical toing-and-froing intensified by everyone's self-consciousness about their 'problems'. Bruce and Prudence's romance negotiates this new minefield, with their first meeting ending in hostile disarray, after which Bruce readvertises, under a different name and personal description, only to find himself dating Prudence in Les Bouchons again. Finally, a confused convocation of therapists and

patients in the restaurant convinces them that the only sane thing is to escape together to Paris. Where, we then discover, they have been all along.

What this peculiar little pirouette, this double-handedness about the setting, does is to give all the agonising about identity an objective cast, a social reality that is itself a riddle. Either these characters are in New York, in which case all the foreign pretensions, the French food and phoney accents, are one sign of displacement and uncertainty. Or they're in Paris, in which case the 'phoneyness' is real and it's the characters who are displaced. This bifurcated view is a new way of opening out a stage play by multiplying the worlds it inhabits. It's also a clue to the secret processes of Altman, to the way he often seems to be taking away with one hand what he gives with the other, conferring a poignant sense of social reality on the desert chimeras of *3 Women*, or treating Raymond Chandler's hero in *The Long Goodbye* as both a knight errant out of his time and a self-indulgent slob who can't get his act together.

Philip Marlowe's situation might be relevant here, since he seems to be the Altman character who was previously most out of sync with reality, and who therefore might have benefited most from therapy. And the new film does at one point deliver the therapeutic goods, when Bob, driven to distraction by Bruce's habit of complicating their life together with women, is left off in Charlotte's consulting room. She, responding in her apparently usual oblivious fashion with a vituperative tirade about gays, provokes him into 'shooting' her with the blanks in a starter's pistol. Immediately claiming this as a breakthrough, she takes him off to Les Bouchons, and puts her fingers in her ears as Bob blazes away at Bruce and Prudence, the scene turning into a delightfully funny slow-motion orgy of seeming violence as therapeutic reality and movie fantasy mesh.

Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1987

Les Boréades

Altman's characteristically inventive contribution to producer Don Boyd's opera compilation film *Aria* centres on an audience enjoying (?) Rameau's music.

LES BORÉADES [SEGMENT FROM ARIA]

Directed by: Robert Altman
Associate Producer: Scott Bushnell
Written by: Robert Altman;
Director of Photography: Pierre Mignot
Special Stills Photography: David Bailey
Editor: Jennifer Augé
Production Designers: Scott Bushnell, John Hay

USA/UK 1987
10 mins

BEYOND THERAPY

Directed by: Robert Altman
©/Production Company: New World Pictures
Production Company: Sandcastle 5 Productions
Executive Producer: Roger Berlind
Produced by: Steven Haft
Associate Producer: Scott Bushnell
New World Production Executive: Paul Almond
Sandcastle 5 Production Executive: Matthew Seig
Production Manager: Daniel Wuhrmann
Production Co-ordinator: Agnès Berméjo
Production Controller: Danielle Foatelli
Location Manager: Christine Raspillère
Production Assistants: Xavier Legris, Laura Bickford
1st Assistant Director: Yann Gilbert
2nd Assistant Director: Patrick Cartoux
Trainee Assistant Director: François Colzé
Script Supervisor: Kathleen Fonmarty
Casting Assistant: Guylène Péan
Screenplay by: Christopher Durang, Robert Altman
Based on the play by: Christopher Durang
Director of Photography: Pierre Mignot
Camera Operator: Jean Lépine
1st Assistant Camera: Nicolas Brunet
2nd Assistant Camera: Natalie Mauger
Gaffer: Pierre Abraham
Electricians: Michel Conckel, Pierre Darmon, Serge-Antoine Crosy
Key Grip: Charles Freess
Grips: Jean-Yves Freess, Jacques Stricanne
Stills Photography: R. Reed Altman
Supervising Editor: Steve Dunn
Editor: Jennifer Augé
Assistant Editors: Pascal Marzin, Serge Rinalde
Apprentice Editor: Karen Logan
Production Design: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Annie Sénéchal
Assistant Art Director: Arnaud de Moléron
Property Master: Roland Jacob
Costume Designer: John Hay
Costumer: Claudia Périno
Wardrobe Assistant: Brigitte Le Brigand
Make-up: Roland Rebeiro de Abreu, Dominique de Vorges
Hair: Alain Bernard

Titles: Euro-Titres
Music by: Gabriel Yared
Piano: Maurice Vander
Bass: Pierre Michelot
Drums: Daniel Humair
Saxophone: Jean-Louis Chautemps
Music Recording Engineer: Bruno Lambert
Sound Mixers: Philippe Lioret, Daniel Belanger
Sound Recording: Studio de La Grande Armée
Sound Assistant: Yves Lainé
Boom Operator: Frédéric Pardon
Re-recording Mixer: Neil Walwer
Sound Editor: Françoise Coispeau
Foley: Jean-Pierre Lelong
Foley Assistants: Mario Melchiori, Jean Duguet

Cast

Julie Hagerty (*Prudence*)
Jeff Goldblum (*Bruce*)
Glenda Jackson (*Charlotte Wallace*)
Tom Conti (*Dr Stuart Framingham*)
Christopher Guest (*Bob*)
Geneviève Page (*Zizi*)
Cris Campion (*Andrew*)
Sandrine Dumas (*Cindy*)
Bertrand Bonvoisin (*manager*)
Nicole Evans (*cashier*)
Louis-Marie Taillefer (*chef*)
Matthew Lesniak (*Mr Bean*)
Laure Killing (*Charlie*)
Gilbert Blin, Vincent Longuemare (*waiters*)
Françoise Armel, Sylvie Lenoir, Annie Monnier, Jeanne Cellard, Hélène Constantine, Yvette Prayer, Joan Tyrrell (*Zizi’s friends*)
Debbie de Coudreaux *

USA 1986©
93 mins

* Uncredited

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