



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

The Player

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

Robert Altman on 'The Player'

I hadn't heard of this project until March a year ago. I hadn't read or heard of the book; it was just presented to me by my agent, who said there's a script out there you might like and they're looking for a director. I read it and said, I would do this if the circumstances were right.

Didn't you think it was perfect for you?

It was good casting to put me in it. We thought we'd get a certain amount of tension from the film, that it wouldn't just be ignored, mainly because of my presence. But we've had a great response to it; I've never seen anything quite like it.

Were the stars a help?

That was one of my primary ideas. I said, if we do this, let's see if we can't do what I did in *Tanner '88*, the television series about the man who ran for president, where we mixed real people with our fictional characters. It seems to me that it would be very difficult to do a film in Hollywood about the movie business and not see any movie people walking around or sitting in restaurants. And we always had the mandate to use actors for the 'Habeas Corpus' film and the dailies.

It was easy to get people to do it: I just called them up and asked them. I gave them a capsule of the script and said, it has a happy ending: it's about a studio executive who murders a writer and gets away with it. And they all laughed and said count me in.

But I think the reason those people did that so graciously was that they wanted to stand up and be counted. They wanted to join the protest. And the protest is against the greed factor. I'm getting mail from people who work in museums, who say, my God, this is the museum system, or this is the magazine business, this is the way my goddamn editors are. So if I'm correct in that, we should do big business outside. For the Hollywood people, it's just a home movie: oh look, there's so and so. It's good for gossip: who is Griffin Mill really supposed to be? For me, he isn't supposed to be anybody. I don't know these players any more, they're all too young, they were on tricycles when I was in Hollywood last. I can't remember their names or connect them to the faces. And by the time I do remember their names, they'll be gone.

Has Hollywood really changed so much? Surely since the 20s it's always been a place of greed?

Yes, but they used the artists. They knew they had to have the artists to make the product they were selling. No matter how much they bullied them or how greedy they got, they were still making movies. As bad as those guys were, they'd go on hunches. Hunches are probably using all your senses, conscious and unconscious, and making a decision. Now the hunch is gone, because the room up top is empty. You've got all these players who keep sending projects upstairs, to get a 'no'. When it gets up there what comes back is what was sent up – the data on how well it's going to do.

What we make now are pictures that worked before; they're in the business of making copies. The artists are the ones who have to feed the marketing machine – we have a joke about it in the film when he says, it's pretty interesting to eliminate the writer from the creative process; if we can just get rid of the director and the actors we've got this thing beat.

You're not confused about why people like this film?

I don't know exactly why they like it. There are a lot of reasons. I think maybe it's because the timing is right. I fully believe that Hollywood is a metaphor for our culture and our society. I think that the film is a reflection of what's happening in the election: people are tired of and object to people who just take, take, take and don't give back. In other words, when their object is just to make money. That's why this film is being received so well.

In a way, though, the film seems your least political and most removed from political reality. It's a self-enclosed, reflexive artifice, from the opening tracking shot to the implied circularity of the ending.

To me, it's like a painting; I do a certain subject. But I do think the film is politically oriented; it's a metaphor for politics. I think the audience has so much information now from all the media, so much is talked about Hollywood and how much people make, it's like the basketball and baseball players. Then these guys who run the corporations, the Steve Rosses and the people making \$64 million in salary. It's shocking to people. And I don't see these people putting it back in.

You've always resisted happy endings in your films, or at least an ending that ties things up neatly. Isn't The Player an exception to this in its closure?

Its structure is like a snail; it turns back into itself just like a fantail shrimp; it reflects itself. Now I can really see what the structure is, I can almost parse it. I'm sure that for the next film I do, I'll keep some of these things in mind. What I learned is now filtered in with my own lore and consequently the next film will be changed.

Is there any character in this film that you identify with?

No, not really, though I see pieces of myself in all the characters. I can understand what their motivation is and what they think about themselves.

One scene in The Player expresses the film's implicit voyeurism – when Tim Robbins is talking to Greta Scacchi while peering through her window.

That's why the scene was done that way. The June Gudmundsdottir character is the one I had the most difficulty with in the script. I decided we shouldn't introduce her until very late: we're trying to set up a point of passion with her. So their first conversation is over the telephone. In the conversation, I indicate that Griffin is starting to flirt with her and they kind of connect. But how to do that? Then I realised that if I show him watching her and she doesn't know she's being observed, he can create a fantasy about her. That's the way we get interested in people. And I was always playing with the primal idea that when a guy goes in and kills another man, he takes the woman: the guy goes in and rapes the town and kills the soldier and takes the woman. So I was trying to use that. And to justify what Griffin does. So I felt that to make this woman so interesting to him, I'd let him create her. I took the position that June Gudmundsdottir too doesn't exist; she could be anybody, but he sees her in a certain way that fascinates him because of what she offers him, because she's not part of his world.

I think for the guy she's living with, she's the perfect woman. You go your own way, you don't see her much, you don't have to take her to the movies with you. I assume she cooks for him, she sits there, she sleeps with him, but she doesn't bother him. It seems that Kahane was offering her to Griffin.

I felt that we should make her a movie character. I tried to explain it to Greta: you're not a real person, you're acting in a movie, you don't have to find out the truth in this woman because there isn't any truth, she doesn't really exist. So you have to find what it is that becomes intriguing to this guy. Is it her philosophy, what she says, her vulnerability and openness? He hasn't seen anything like this, everything in his world has reason.

Is she like a blank movie screen on which you can project your desires?

Absolutely. That's the way I felt about it. I know Tolkin had it differently, but... (shrugs).

It seems that with her, Griffin might even be redeemed.

He's about to be redeemable. He has a compulsion to confess to her; he feels guilt about this thing. He's not a murderer, he's a manslaughterer. If he hadn't seen her when he talked to her, I wonder if he would have gone so far as to kill the guy? Maybe her presence brought out a primal thing in him?

There seems to be a motif of ritual murder or sacrificial death in your movies, as well as in Tolkin's.

What other films is that in?

Let's see... McCabe & Mrs. Miller, Vincent & Theo.

Well, yeah. See, death is the only ending I know. A movie doesn't end; it has a stopping place. That story, those people don't die then: they live on and have terrible lives if it's a happy ending, or if it's a sad ending, they may survive it and recover and have happy lives. So death is the only ending and I deal with death as an ending. The people I have die are usually the wrong people, the ones you don't expect to die. That's the way it seems when people die – when friends of mine die, it's not the person I expect, it's always somebody I didn't expect. So that's another little truth thing I feel, and I feel compelled to use those kinds of things.

In your films, the gifted individual is invariably crushed by the system. Do you feel that's inevitable?

I don't know. I don't feel there's any justice in death, in who dies and who doesn't. And I'm not sure who's better off – the person who dies, or the person who doesn't. If you say happy ending, let's talk about *The Player*. If you're following Bonnie Sherow in *The Player*, it's not really a happy ending; if you follow Griffin Mill, it is. But if you think about it, it's not really a happy ending because this guy has lost his soul; he's become nothing. And with her, this could be a happy ending: even though she's sad right now, she's out of this fucking mess and maybe she'll find some expression in life that will give her more happiness.

Robert Altman interviewed by Peter Keogh, *Sight & Sound*, June 1992

THE PLAYER

Directed by: Robert Altman
Production Companies: Avenue Entertainment, Addis/Wechsler and Associates
In association with: Spelling Entertainment
Executive Producer: Cary Brokaw
Co-executive Producer: William S. Gilmore
Produced by: David Brown, Michael Tolkin, Nick Wechsler
Co-producer: Scott Bushnell
Associate Producer: David Levy
Unit Production Manager: Tom Udell
Production Supervisor: Jim Chesney
Production Accountant: Kimberly Edwards Shapiro
Location Manager: Jack Kney
1st Assistant Director: Allan Nichols
Script Supervisor: Carole Starkes
Screenplay by/Based on his novel: Michael Tolkin
Director of Photography: Jean L epine
1st Assistant Camera: Robert Reed Altman
Gaffer: Don Muchow
Key Grip: Anthony T. Marra II
Karaoke Videos: Larry 'Doc' Karman
Still Photographer: Lorey Sebastian
Special Effects: John Hartigan
Edited by: Geraldine Peroni
Film Editor: Maysie Hoy
Assistant Editor: A. Michelle Page
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Jerry Fleming
June's Artwork: Sydney Cooper
Property Master: James Monroe
Wardrobe Designed by: Alexander Julian
Make-up Artist: Deborah Larsen
Hairdresser: Scott Williams
Title Design: Dan Perri
Title Painting by: Charles Bragg
Titles and Optical Effects by: Mercer Titles and Optical Effects
Colour Timer: Michael Stanwick
Music by: Thomas Newman
Production Sound Mixer: John Pritchett
Recordist: Rich Gooch
Boom Operator: Joel Shryack
Re-recording Mixers: Matthew Iadarola, Stanley Kastner
Supervising Sound Editor: Michael Redbourn
Dialogue Editors: Joseph Holsen, Ed Lachmann
Sound Effects Editor: Ken Burton
Stunt Co-ordinator: Greg Walker
Animal Trainer: Jim Brockett

Cast

Tim Robbins (*Griffin Mill*)
Greta Scacchi (*June Gudmundsdottir*)
Fred Ward (*Walter Stuckel*)
Whoopi Goldberg (*Detective Susan Avery*)
Peter Gallagher (*Larry Levy*)
Brion James (*Joel Levison*)
Cynthia Stevenson (*Bonnie Sherow*)
Vincent D'Onofrio (*David Kahane*)
Dean Stockwell (*Andy Civella*)
Richard E. Grant (*Tom Oakley*)
Dina Merrill (*Celia*)
Angela Hall (*Jan*)
Lyle Lovett (*Detective Paul DeLongpre*)
Sydney Pollack (*Dick Mellen*)
Leah Ayres (*Sandy*)
Randall Batinkoff (*Reg Goldman*)
Jeremy Piven (*Steve Reeves*)
Gina Gershon (*Whitney Gersh*)
Frank Barhydt (*Frank Murphy*)
Mike E. Kaplan (*Marty Grossman*)
Kevin Scannell (*Gar Girard*)
Margery Bond (*witness*)
Susan Emshwiller (*Detective Broom*)
Brian Brophy (*Phil*)
Michael Tolkin (*Eric Schechter*)
Stephen Tolkin (*Carl Schechter*)
Natalie Strong (*Natalie*)
Pete Koch (*Walter*)
Pamela Bowen (*Trixie*)
Jeff Weston (*Rocco*)
Steve Allen, Richard Anderson, Ren e Auberjonois, Harry Belafonte, Shari Belafonte, Karen Black, Michael Bowen, Gary Busey, Robert Carradine, Charles Davenport Champlin, Cher, James Coburn, Cathy Lee Crosby, John Cusack, Brad David, Paul Dooley, Thereza Ellis, Peter Falk, Felicia Farr, Kasia Figura, Louise Fletcher, Dennis Franz, Teri Garr, Leeza Gibbons, Scott Glenn, Jeff Goldblum, Elliott Gould, Joel Grey, David Alan Grier, Buck Henry, Anjelica Huston, Kathy Ireland, Steve James, Maxine John-James, Sally Kellerman, Sally Kirkland, Jack Lemmon, Marlee Matlin, Andie MacDowell, Malcolm McDowell, Jayne Meadows, Martin Mull, Jennifer Nash, Nick Nolte, Alexandra Powers, Bert Remsen, Guy Remsen, Patricia Resnick, Burt Reynolds, Jack Riley, Julia Roberts, Mimi Rogers, Annie Ross, Alan Rudolph, Jill St. John, Susan Sarandon, Adam Simon, Rod Steiger, Joan Tewkesbury, Brian Tochi, Lily Tomlin, Robert Wagner, Ray Walston, Bruce Willis, Marvin Young (*themselves*)
Paul Hewitt (*Jimmy Chase*)

USA 1992

124 mins

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Nashville Continues from Jun

Vincent and Theo Sat 3 Jul 11:20; Tue 13 Jul 20:30

Pr t- porter Sat 3 Jul 18:05; Mon 19 Jul 17:40

The Player Sat 3 Jul 20:40; Mon 12 Jul 17:45; Wed 28 Jul 20:30

Short Cuts Sun 4 Jul 11:30; Sat 17 Jul 19:30

Kansas City Sun 4 Jul 15:20; Thu 15 Jul 17:40

Cookie's Fortune Tue 6 Jul 14:50; Wed 7 Jul 20:40; Tue 27 Jul 17:40

McCabe & Mrs. Miller Tue 6 Jul 18:10

3 Women Thu 8 Jul 20:30

The Gingerbread Man Fri 9 Jul 20:40; Sat 17 Jul 17:50

Dr T & The Women Sat 10 Jul 15:00; Mon 26 Jul 20:30

Gosford Park Sun 11 Jul 15:20; Sun 18 Jul 18:20; Fri 23 Jul 14:30

The Company Tue 13 Jul 17:50; Sat 31 Jul 11:50

A Prairie Home Companion Sun 25 Jul 12:00; Sat 31 Jul 17:50

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