



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Short Cuts

The last word spoken in Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* is 'lemonade': we hear it as the camera tracks out over a briefly shaken Los Angeles, as two partying couples toast to survival in the face of a minor apocalypse. As so often happens with Altman, who is famous for his habit of scrambling soundtracks to the limit of comprehensibility, the word is audible but not entirely noticeable, certainly not impressing itself on you as central to the film's meaning. Yet, in an oblique fashion, that is precisely what it is – an operational password for the entire film. For 'Lemonade' is the title of a poem by Raymond Carver, and the poem's subject is also the film's real subject, as well as its structural principle.

Short Cuts is based on nine stories by Carver, who died in 1988 aged 50, having established himself as the poet laureate of small, desolate, claustrophobic middle American lives. 'Lemonade' itself is not directly adapted in the film, although its theme – What if this had happened, rather than that? What then? – is foregrounded in the episode involving Jack Lemmon, and runs throughout the film, both in the narratives themselves and in the way they interlock. In the poem, a man ponders on his son's drowning; he is convinced he would still be alive if only he had not gone to fetch lemonade that day. The lemonade, he reasons, would not have been there if only there had not been lemons in the shops. So he tries to pick his way back causally to a prelapsarian moment: 'It all harks back to first causes, back to the first lemon cultivated on earth.'

Carver knows there is no first lemon, and Altman knows it too. There is no way of untangling the mesh of cause and effect, hence the gloriously unruly tangle of chance that governs *Short Cuts*. The credits divide the cast list conveniently into nine family sets of characters, plus supporting players, but in reality the groups are not separated neatly from one another; rather, they intermingle, meeting, playing, straying with seismic effect into each other's lives. Each group has its own story, but no story belongs solely to one group. Altman plays with an illusion of order by framing the narratives between two urban catastrophes during which all the characters are effectively united simply by virtue of being in the same boat. The sense of unity is illusory, though, imposed as it is by narrative contingency. There is no start or finish, no first or last lemon, only the all-pervasive smell of lemonade. Savour it, or balk at its bitterness, that's all you get in life, and you have to drink it.

Altman first read Raymond Carver's stories on a plane journey. Inspired by them, he started planning a Carver film, and got as far as selecting the locations and signing up a number of actors, including Tim Robbins, Peter Gallagher and Fred Ward. But finally the finance was not available. While pondering his next move, he was offered a project called *The Player*. Those same actors found their way into that film, which in 1992 turned out to be Altman's first commercial and critical success in years – as well as a modish *succès de scandale* among the Hollywood mandarins, at once outraged and flattered to see their world lampooned. *Short Cuts* was financed on the strength of that film.

Unlike *The Player*, *Short Cuts* plays less on reality *per se* than on the real. Carver's low-key, minimally stylised portrayals of the doldrums and zero moments in blue-collar living led him to be counted as a leading exponent of that amorphous school known as 'Dirty Realism'. He wrote about dead marriages, dead-end jobs, typhoons in teacups, minor misunderstandings that blow up into little household apocalypses – but apocalypses in aspic. What's remarkable about these stories is the way they merge explosiveness with absolute stillness. A typical story, one of those in *Short Cuts*, is 'Jerry and Molly and Sam': in which a fatigued father contrives to lose the family dog, then has to retrieve it. When he finally finds the dog, he simply contemplates it, and the story ends on a suspended moment: 'He sat there. He thought he didn't feel so bad, all things considered. The world was full of dogs. There were dogs and there were dogs. Some dogs you just couldn't do anything with.'

Altman and his co-writer Frank Barhydt take a very different approach. The episode becomes a source of high farce, the dog a benign comic focus for the chaotic rage of Tim Robbins' blustering cop. There's clearly more meeting the eye – more energy, more incident – in Altman's version than the moments of cold, clear deadness that Carver's original stories are imbued with. Yet Altman claims that he leaves out everything that Carver leaves out – and precisely what *that* is, he says, is 'judgement, in most cases. I make a little bit more judgement than Carver made. I have a tougher task in a way. It's very hard to do films as minimalism, because the audience is there and they see every square inch of that screen. They see wallpaper and they see rugs and they see shirts and expressions and weather – until all of the descriptive passages that you have in a book are *there*.

'Carver uses no descriptive passages, so I don't believe a Raymond Carver story can be literally translated to a visual medium. So I just tried to take the feeling from Carver, the type of incident he dealt with, and express that in a way that tells the same story for an audience. I don't think that I could take any *one* of his stories and make a film out of it.'

How did Altman and Barhydt decide which stories to use, and which ones would lead into which others?

'They do it themselves automatically. You take one base story, you throw it up on the wall, and it's like vines – they grow where there's place to grow in and out of one another.' The image of vines perhaps expresses what's most peculiar to the film. It's certainly true that, as some Carver specialists have pointed out, the film does not strictly adhere to the writer's spirit; it's at once too upbeat and too cynical for that. It only rarely displays the stoic empathy that the stories solicit for their characters; instead, Altman's characters redeem the claustrophobic quality of their lives by the energy and charisma with which they perform (to the extent that some of these lives look somewhat glamorous because they're incarnated by the likes of Tom Waits or Frances McDormand). But it is the connections between the episodes that make the film – the sense that they're all bunches of event growing on the same tangled vine. And it's when we become aware of the incongruity of these connections that the film transcends its merely anecdotal base.

'This is what happens every day of your life,' says Altman, 'but we don't recognise it so much because we can't take the involvement. Somebody gets hit by a car and you stop and look in the street, and you think, "I don't want to see that," so you go the other way. But people who don't go the other way

see more of that story, and the people who are actually involved in that story have another story. These things go on all the time, and it's the juxtaposition of these lives that makes *Short Cuts* interesting.'

The Carver stories operate on two levels. Each one is very much like a closed box, a miniature in which a single core of event, or lack of event, is to be contemplated – in the tradition of modernist short story narrative since Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield. At the same time, however, the stories taken together, and the regularity of the themes and styles, make an overall human comedy made up of small mosaic pieces. *Short Cuts*, though, functions only through the concatenation of parts – the clash of micro-narratives sparking ironic parallels and negations off each other.

Despite the sense of impending chaos that is perhaps inevitable in a film that juggles 22 lead parts, there are plenty of guide rails in *Short Cuts* to ensure that we know where we are. One is the use of familiar faces in the cast. ('I don't have to tell you too much about these people,' says Altman. 'You do the work for me by recognising them.') Another is the use of a nightclub singer, played by Annie Ross, to act as a chorus, casting a sardonic torch-song commentary throughout the film. And another is the way the diversity of incident is framed between two minor apocalypses.

This closing image suggests a director who likes to keep a tight rein on his creation. But, Altman says, only one type of control interests him: 'the control to be able to change and let ideas come in from my collaborators. To have the ability to say "Yeah" and turn the piece this way or that.'

Altman also offers another, perhaps more apposite analogy, that applies just as well to his career as a whole – reckless, unruly, wilfully patchy – as it does to particular films like *Short Cuts*. 'It comes down to what occurs to me. It's like doing art – I'm not doing Rembrandts or Corots, I'm doing Rauschenbergs. I'm doing collages. If suddenly I want to stick into my painting a photograph of a flat-iron, it just goes in.'

Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, March 1994

SHORT CUTS

Director: Robert Altman
©: Short Cut Productions
Presented by: Spelling Films International
Presented in association with: Fine Line Features
Production Company: Avenue Pictures
Executive Producer: Scott Bushnell
Producer: Cary Brokaw
Associate Producers: Mike Kaplan, David Levy
Unit Production Manager: Diana Pokorny
Production Accountant: Kimberly Edwards Shapiro
Location Managers: Jack Kney, Paul Boydston
1st Assistant Director: Allan Nicholls
Script Supervisor: Luca Kouimelis
Screenplay: Robert Altman, Frank Barhydt
Based on the writings by: Raymond Carver
Director of Photography: Walt Lloyd
Helicopter Camera Operator: Alexander Witt
1st Assistant Camera: Robert Reed Altman
Gaffer: Jack English
Key Grip: Anthony T. Marra II
Stills Photography: Joyce Rudolph
Special Effects: John Harrdigan, Christopher Nelson
Film Editors: Geraldine Peroni, Suzy Elmiger
1st Assistant Editors: David Leonard, Sandra Kaufman
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Jerry Fleming
Marian's Paintings: Meg Freeman
Property Master: Tony Maccario
Costumes by: John Hay
Make-up/Hair Supervisor: Theo Mayes
Titles Designed/Produced by: Balsmeyer & Everett Inc
Colour Timer: Mike Stanwick
Original Score Composed by: Mark Isham
Performed by: David Speltz, Mark Isham
Production Sound Mixer: John Pritchett
Boom Operator: Joel Shryack
Re-recording Mixers: Lee Dichter, Michael Barry
Supervising Sound Editor: Eliza Paley
Dialogue Editors: Jeffrey Stern, Elliot Deitch
Sound Effects Editor: Margie Crimmins
Stunt Co-ordinator: Greg Walker
Animal Trainer: Kim's Critters

Cast

Andie MacDowell (*Ann Finnigan*)
Bruce Davison (*Howard Finnigan*)
Jack Lemmon (*Paul Finnigan*)
Zane Cassidy (*Casey Finnigan*)
Julianne Moore (*Marian Wyman*)
Matthew Modine (*Dr Ralph Wyman*)
Anne Archer (*Claire Kane*)
Fred Ward (*Stuart Kane*)
Jennifer Jason Leigh (*Lois Kaiser*)

Chris Penn (*Jerry Kaiser*)
Joseph C. Hopkins (*Joe Kaiser*)
Josette Maccario (*Josette Kaiser*)
Lili Taylor (*Honey Bush*)
Robert Downey Jr (*Bill Bush*)
Madeleine Stowe (*Sherri Shepard*)
Tim Robbins (*Gene Shepard*)
Cassy Friel (*Sandy Shepard*)
Dustin Friel (*Will Shepard*)
Austin Friel (*Austin Shepard*)
Lily Tomlin (*Doreen Piggot*)
Tom Waits (*Earl Piggot*)
Frances McDormand (*Betty Weathers*)
Peter Gallagher (*Stormy Weathers*)
Jarrett Lennon (*Chad Weathers*)
Annie Ross (*Tess Trainer*)
Lori Singer (*Zoe Trainer*)
Lyle Lovett (*Andy Bitkower*)
Buck Henry (*Gordon Johnson*)
Huey Lewis (*Vern Miller*)
Danny Darst (*Aubrey Bell*)
Margerie Bond (*Dora Willis*)
Robert DoQui (*Knute Willis*)
Darnell Williams (*Joe Robbins*)
Michael Beach (*Jim Stone*)
Andi Chapman (*Harriet Stone*)
Deborah Falconer (*Barbara*)
Susie Cusack (*Nancy*)
Charles Rocket (*Wally Littleton*)
Jane Alden (*Mrs Schwartzmeier*)
Christian Altman (*Jimmy Miller*)
Willie Marlett (*Jimmy's friend*)
Dirk Blocker (*diner customer*)
Suzanne Calvert (*Tarmac secretary*)
Natalie Strong (*mourner*)
Jay Della (*bartender*)
Jeruth Persson (*club owner*)
Derek Webster (*Joe Robbins' pal*)
Nathaniel H. Harris III (*Joe Robbins' pal*)
Alex Trebek (*himself*)
Jerry Dunphy (*himself*)

Annie Ross & The Low Note Quintet:

Annie Ross (*vocals*), Terry Adams (*piano*), Bobby Previte (*drums*), Greg Cohen (*bass*), Gene Estes (*vibes*), Bruce Fowler (*trombone*)

The Trout Quintet:

Lori Singer (*cello*), Stuart Canin (*1st violin*), Anatoly Rosinsky (*violin*), Roland Kato (*viola*), Armen Guzelimian (*piano*)

USA 1993 188 mins

Print courtesy of the Robert Altman Collection at the
UCLA Film & Television Archive

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Prêt-à-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

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