



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Cookie's Fortune

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

'Aunt Jewell was murdered!' Except she wasn't (and it's no spoiler to say so). Rather, the murder plot is an elaborate ruse concocted by Jewell's niece (Glenn Close, amusingly duplicitous and self-righteous) to avoid the scandal of a family suicide – a ruse that ends up implicating Jewell's close companion and caretaker Willis (Charles S. Dutton).

An absolutely delightful and often hilarious comedy of southern manners and misdemeanours, at once sharply focused and marvellously relaxed, *Cookie's Fortune* slipped under the radar at the time of its release. But this film is the definition of a gem, and one that has some slyly subversive things to say about family and race too. A crack cast creates a wonderful comic buzz, from Patricia Neal's sublime (if all-too-brief) appearance as the eccentric Jewell, Chris O'Donnell's adorably befuddled and horny cop, Liv Tyler's independent-minded daughter and Dutton's warm Willis. Then there's Julianne Moore, as Close's oppressed and apparently simple-minded sister, who is liberated by her starring role in a wonderfully shaky amateur production of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*.

Alex Ramon, bfi.org.uk, 11 May 2021

A contemporary review

Cookie's Fortune, Altman's second film on the trot to be set in the Deep South, is in a far more relaxed groove than its predecessor *The Gingerbread Man*. It takes the widow Cookie an eternity to walk up and down the staircase of her southern mansion and Altman is determined to show every last step. Likewise, her companion Willis may be falsely accused of her murder, but that doesn't mean he is going to move in anything other than his usual shuffling gait. Altman and his actors take their tempo from the slow, mournful blues which fills the soundtrack, and it's only when Ruby Wilson belts out the opening song that the pace picks up.

One character who isn't in the slightest laid-back is Camille, the arch conspirator and busybody who directs the townsfolk in a truly atrocious Easter pageant production of *Salomé*. Camille's cast declaim their lines with a dreary solemnity while Camille's sister Cora hoofs her way through her own clumsy version of the Dance of the Seven Veils. There is something perverse about watching highly accomplished actors pretending to be bungling amateurs, but Camille's directorial approach doesn't seem markedly different from that of Altman himself. She shares his morbidity ('that needs more blood around the neck,' she complains about the severed head of John the Baptist)

and, like Altman, she seems to enjoy working with a large ensemble cast. If her production of *Salomé* is mannered and a little absurd, so too is *Cookie's Fortune*.

Anne Rapp's screenplay tries – not entirely successfully – to undercut its own prevailing mood of whimsy by hinting at the dark events which cloud the protagonists' lives. This is a tale about a dysfunctional family which could easily have slipped over into Flannery O'Connor-style Southern Gothic. Most of the menfolk seem to be absent – either dead or fled – and those who remain are either vaguely sinister, like Lyle Lovett's voyeuristic catfish supplier, or downright goofy, like the sheriff's infatuated deputy.

But Rapp can't resist poking gentle fun at the foibles of the small-town folk: Cookie smokes a pipe; Willis is obsessed with fishing. The mood is closer to that of Garrison Keillor's *Lake Woebegone* than to the pessimism of Raymond Carver (whose stories Altman adapted with such skill and perception in *Short Cuts*). Mild eccentricity reigns. 'She's a kinder soul, and has a rare ability to find in these characters an authentic, truthful quiriness,' the director has observed of Rapp. In trying to be faithful to her screenplay, he risks acting against his own nature: woolly-minded benevolence is not what you expect from the soured old magus. Just as Camille has a neat way of sweeping anything disagreeable under the carpet, Altman chooses not to make too much of an issue out of Camille's racism or Cookie's suicide – the latter's death turns out to be little more than the 'macguffin' that sets the plot rolling.

Still, there are neat touches. Altman makes the most of the creaky gun cupboard door which never stays closed, and marks Cookie's death in mordantly funny fashion with an explosion of feathers. (She shoots herself through a pillow.) Liv Tyler, as the coltish, long-limbed, dulcet-toned Emma, and Charles Dutton as Willis have an easy comic rapport. Their scenes together yield the film's warmest and most likeable moments. Unlike *The Gingerbread Man*, which could have been directed by anybody, *Cookie's Fortune* does bear Altman's imprimatur. The old energy and bite may be lacking, but at least this lazy, amiable shaggy-dog story was made in the same freewheeling, idiosyncratic way as Altman's best work.

Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight & Sound*, September 1999

COOKIE'S FORTUNE

Directed by: Robert Altman
©: Kudzu Productions Inc
Presented by: October Films
Production Companies: Sandcastle 5 Productions, Elysian Dreams
Production Company: Moonstone Entertainment *
Executive Producer: Willi Baer
Produced by: Robert Altman, Etchie Stroh
Co-producer: David Levy, James McLindon
Unit Production Manager: Barbara A. Hall
Production Co-ordinator: Robin Mulcahy
Production Accountant: Cheryl Kurk
Location Manager: Gregory H. Alpert
2nd Unit Director: Stephen Altman
1st Assistant Director: Tommy Thompson
Script Supervisor: Lexie Longstreet
Casting by: Pam Dixon Mickelson
Casting Associate: Barbara Allen
Written by: Anne Rapp
Director of Photography: Toyomichi Kurita
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Robert Reed Altman
Camera Operator: Robert Reed Altman
1st Assistant Cameraman: Michael Edison Satrazemis
Gaffer: Patrick Reddish
Key Grips: Tim Pershing, Kevin Erb
Unit Photographer: Joyce Rudolph
Editor: Abraham Lim
Assistant Editors: C.Y. Lee, Susan Fitzer
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Richard Johnson
Art Department Co-ordinator: Kristin Webb
Set Decorator: Susan J. Emshwiller
Property Master: Anthony Maccario
Costumes by: Dona Granata
Costume Supervisor: Susan Kaufmann
Key Make-up: Manlio Rocchetti
Make-up Artist: Linda Melazzo
Key Hair: Martial Corneville
Wig Design by: Aldo Signoretti
Main Title Design: Patty Ryan
Titles/Opticals: CFI: The Imaging Group
Colour Timer: Dan Muscarella
Music: David A. Stewart
Musicians (Guitars): David A. Stewart, The Edge
Musician (Double Bass): Chucho Merchán
Harmonium: Patrick Seymour
Salomé Staging: Frank Chapin
Salomé Choreography: Jennifer M. Mizenko
Sound Mixer: Mark Weingarten

Digital Transfer Engineer: Anne Black
Boom Operator: Doug Shamburger
Post-production Sound: Digital Sound & Picture
Re-recording Mixers: John Ross, Joe Barnett
Supervising Sound Editor: Frederick Howard
Dialogue Editors: David Grant, Michael Hertlein, Robert C. Jackson
Sound Effects Editors: Javier Bennassar, Michael Mullane, Roland Thai
Dialect Coach: Joann Edwards

Cast

Glenn Close (*Camille Dixon*)
Julianne Moore (*Cora Duvall*)
Liv Tyler (*Emma Duvall*)
Chris O'Donnell (*Jason Brown*)
Charles S. Dutton (*Willis Richland*)
Patricia Neal (*Jewel Mae 'Cookie' Orcutt*)
Ned Beatty (*Lester Boyle*)
Courtney B. Vance (*Otis Tucker*)
Donald Moffat (*Jack Palmer*)
Lyle Lovett (*Manny Hood*)
Danny Darst (*Billy Cox*)
Matt Malloy (*Eddie 'The Expert' Pitts*)
Niecy Nash (*Wanda Carter*)
Randle Mell (*Patrick Freeman*)
Rufus Thomas (*Theo Johnson*)
Ruby Wilson (*Josie Martin*)
Preston Stobel (*Ronnie Freeman*)
Ann Whitfield (*Mrs Henderson/Herodias*)
Hank Worsham (*Tigellinus*)
Kenny Pillow (*soldier 1*)
Derek Guyer (*soldier 2*)
Emily Sindelar (*Marlene*)
Heath Lail (*prop boy*)
Shari Schneider (*Mrs Tippit*)
John Sullivan (*Mr Tippit*)
Red West (*Mr Henderson*)
Ferguson Reid, Chris Coulson (*deputies*)
Cheryl Cole (*picnic lady*)
Fred Sanders (*guitarist*)
Jimmy Ellis (*drummer*)
Solomon McDaniel (*keyboardist*)
Terris Tate (*bass guitarist*)

USA 1999
118 mins

* Uncredited

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Nashville Continues from Jun
Vincent and Theo Sat 3 Jul 11:20; Tue 13 Jul 20:30
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; Mon 12 Jul 20:20
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
The Long Goodbye Tue 13 Jul 18:00
A Prairie Home Companion Sun 25 Jul 12:00; Sat 31 Jul 17:50

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