



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

The Gingerbread Man

A contemporary review

When John Grisham is a true publishing phenomenon and Hollywood has been eager to turn his stories into movies, especially after the massive success of Sydney Pollack's version of *The Firm* in 1993. Since then there have been: *The Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula, 1993), *The Client* (Joel Schumacher, 1994), *A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher, 1996), *The Chamber* (James Foley, 1996) *John Grisham's The Rainmaker* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1997) as well as a TV series based on *The Client*. Although a version of *The Runaway Jury* (to be directed by *auteur manqué* Philip Kaufman) is promised, the last so far is *The Gingerbread Man*. In it Kenneth Branagh plays Rick Magruder, a successful lawyer who gets involved in the problems of a young woman who is being stalked by her father, a religious fanatic. Things escalate when the father escapes from the asylum where Magruder had had him committed and then threatens the lawyer and his children. If one throws in the inevitable chases, rescues, murders, courtroom manoeuvring and such, this will not seem very different from the other films mentioned above. All in fact are reasonably faithful adaptations, with Coppola's clearly being the most effective and Schumacher's the shoddiest, but *The Gingerbread Man* stands out in many ways, not least because it is not strictly canon.

Robert Altman's 1997 film is in fact not taken from a novel but is based on an original screenplay that Grisham had written many years previously. Although its protagonist is a lawyer, as with all his books, this story is actually closer in feeling to *film noir* with its dark atmosphere (literally and metaphorically-speaking) and with a *femme fatale* ably manipulating the hero, and it relies less on courtroom procedure for its plot twists and turns. It is however also hard to know how much of this is Grisham's doing as, by the time the film was released, his screenplay credit had been reduced to merely one for 'original story'. When speaking with *Entertainment Weekly* Robert Altman stated that he had never even talked to Grisham '...or met him. I wouldn't know him if he fell in my soup'. Indeed, the production itself was beset with problems and setbacks almost as tortuous as the film's plot.

When first announced, the film was envisioned as a straightforward rendering of Grisham's script, with Annette Bening co-starring and with Luis Mandoki (*White Palace*, *Message in a Bottle*) directing, with filming due to begin in the middle of October 1996 in Memphis, Tennessee. However, this was not to be, with Bening announcing her withdrawal on discovering that she was pregnant. Subsequently, Mandoki also departed and Branagh himself moved on to make *The Proposition* (then known under the title *Shakespeare's Sister*). The script passed through several hands (including, briefly, that of neo-*noir* maestro John Dahl) before eventually being accepted by Robert Altman. Altman may have seemed an odd choice to helm a John Grisham story, with Stephen Amidon of *The Times* considering it 'a bit like Salvador Dalí designing the next Ford sedan'. It certainly didn't help that the one time that he had attempted to make a straightforward thriller from a best-selling novel, William Goldman's *Heat*, he had been fired almost immediately (amongst many others incidentally). But his presence quickly impressed Branagh and so filming eventually began at the end of January in 1997 in Savannah, Georgia, by which time Altman had overhauled the script (now credited to the mysterious 'Al Hayes'). The cast was as large and eclectic a mix as one would expect from Altman, including newcomer Embeth Davitz as the woman in jeopardy, Robert Duvall as the father and Famke Janssen as

Magruder's ex-wife, as well as Tom Berenger, Daryl Hannah and Robert Downey Jr, who was under a court order during the filming. Post-production was fraught with problems: when Altman's first cut (in which the film ends *before* the protagonist's eventual fate is determined by the courts) was tested and disliked by audiences, production company Polygram took the film away and re-edited it, at which point Altman threatened to remove his name from the credits and replace it with the Director's Guild infamous pseudonym Alan Smithee. Subsequently co-producer Chris Black left Polygram over their handling of the editing, and when the new version fared no better with test audiences, Altman was allowed to complete his version, which was eventually released, though barely.

Since the film wasn't based on any previously published material, it has the advantage of seeming much fresher than previous adaptations, which may well have been what attracted Altman in the first place. *The Gingerbread Man* is by comparison a thoroughly dour film that eschews the David and Goliath approach that is standard in Grisham's plotting, and is peopled with characters that are much more subtly shaded and realistic. Branagh's Magruder is a deeply flawed man, a choleric, combative and arrogant figure clearly going through some sort of mid-life crisis. In the film he is much more believable and compromised than any of the main characters in Grisham's other fiction, while his scenes with the excellent Davidtz and Janssen bristle with emotion.

At the same time, the film has many examples of Altman's mordant wit and talent for telling detail such as the picture of the Gingerbread Man on the wall at Magruder's children's school, or the sly way in which Davidtz's character is introduced when we see her palming an ashtray early in the film. Al Clark in his seminal book *Raymond Chandler in Hollywood* described Altman's method and films as '... cool, dispassionate, observant, outwardly anarchic but vigorously disciplined within their chosen sphere'. This is certainly true of his handling of *The Gingerbread Man* and there are many distinctively Altmanesque moments, such as in the early party scene in which Magruder and Mallory Doss first meet, and in his handling of the large crowds in a later sequence set in a large market. In his *Guardian* interview held on 23 May this year, Branagh praised Altman's improvisatory technique and mastery in the handling of large crowd scenes filled with extras.

While Altman's adaptation of Chandler's classic *The Long Goodbye* is an extraordinary explosion of the private eye myth, his take on Grisham is less revisionist and certainly less severe. Although his pessimism and misanthropy and cynical mistrust of authority remain, the plot is left largely in place and there are a number of very suspenseful sequences as well. Also notable is as a well-realised Hurricane (named Geraldo) which recalls the storm at the climax of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and which was added by Altman to the script. It blows for the majority of the film, making the characters, in critic Philip French's words, all appear to be suffering from PMT – 'Pre Monsoon Tension'. This is brilliantly realised by Chinese cinematographer Changwei Gu who keeps the colour palette incredibly limited, only using explosions of red for certain sequences while managing to make Savannah seem both immediate and real as well and exotic and alien.

Though obviously an uneasy alliance, the film provides enough of Grisham's plotting and Altman's trademark skill with actors and assured style to provide a film that is both entertaining on a purely narrative level and altogether more satisfying on an aesthetic and emotional one.

Sergio Angelini

THE GINGERBREAD MAN

Director: Robert Altman
Production Companies: Island Pictures, Enchanter Entertainment, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment
Production Company: Gingerbread Productions *
Executive Producers: Mark Burg, Glen A. Tobias, Todd Baker
Producer: Jeremy Tannenbaum
Associate Producer: David Levy
Unit Production Manager: Paul Kurta
Production Supervisor: Tim Christenson
Production Co-ordinator: Steve Caines
Location Manager: Gregory H. Alpert
Post-production Supervisor: Dan Genetti
1st Assistant Directors: Alexandra Perce, Michael Moore, Paul Prenderville
Script Supervisors: Lexie Longstreet, Mary Cybulski
Casting Directors: Mary Jo Slater, Shay Griffin, Chez Casting
Screenplay: Al Hayes
Based on an original story by: John Grisham
Director of Photography: Changwei Gu
Camera Operators: Robert Reed Altman, Lawrence 'Doc' Karman
Wescam Operator: David Norris
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Tom Kittle
Editor: Geraldine Peroni
Associate Editor: Helen Hand
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Jack Ballance
Set Designer: Glenn Rivers
Set Decorator: Brian Kasch
Costume Supervisor: Susan Kaufmann
Department Head Make-up: Deborah Larsen, Vonda Morris
Key Hairstylists: Shelly Hutchins, Lona Vigi
Title Design: Patty Ryan
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title/Mirage
Music: Mark Isham
Additional Music Design: Andrew Allen King
Sound Design: Randle Akerson, Richard King
Sound Mixer: John Pritchett
Re-recorder: Matthew Iadarola
Dialogue Editors: Hugo Weng, Michael Haight
Sound Effects Recordist/Designer: John Paul Fasal
Sound Effects Editors: James Matheny, Martin Maryska, William Jacobs, Noah Blough
Stunt Co-ordinator: Greg Walker
Legal Consultants: Sonny Seiler, Walter Hartridge, Bouhan Williams & Levy, Larry Chesin
Marine Co-ordinator: Wright Gres
Animal Wrangler: Gloria Winship Ayon
Helicopter Pilot: Cress Horne

Cast

Kenneth Branagh (*Rick Magruder*)
Embeth Davidtz (*Mallory Doss*)
Robert Downey Jr (*Clyde Pell*)
Daryl Hannah (*Lois Harlan*)
Robert Duvall (*Dixon Doss*)
Tom Berenger (*Pete Randle*)
Famke Janssen (*Leeanne*)
Clyde Hayes (*Carl Alden*)
Mae Whitman (*Libby*)
Jesse James (*Jeff*)
Troy Beyer (*Konnie Dugan*)
Julia R. Perce (*Cassandra*)
Danny Darst (*Sheriff Hope*)
Sonny Seiler (*Phillip Dunson*)
Walter Hartridge (*Edmund Hess*)
Vernon E. Jordan Jr (*Larry Benjamin*)
Lori Beth Sikes (*Betty*)
Rosemary Newcott (*Dr Bernice Sampson*)
Wilbur T. Fitzgerald (*Judge Russo*)
David Hirsberg (*Tom Cherry*)
Paul Carden (*Judge Cooper*)
Michelle Benjamin-Cooper (*principal*)
Christine Seabrook (*secretary*)
Bob Minor (*Mr Pitney*)
Myrna White (*tax clerk*)
Jim Grimshaw (*desk cop*)
Stuart Greer (*Detective Hal*)
Nita Hardy (*policewoman*)
Ferguson Reid (*Detective Black*)
Benjamin T. Gay (*court clerk*)
Mark Bednarz, Bill Cunningham, Chip Tootle (*Effingham County sheriffs*)
Sonny Shroyer, Mike Pniewski,
Jay S. Pearsonstorm (*Chatham County sheriffs*)
L.H. Smith (*evacuee*)
Wren Arthur (*Barfly Robin*)
Angela Costrini (*barfly*)
Gregory H. Alpert (*Barfly Clark*)
Lydia Marlene (*tattooed bartender*)
Bill Crabb (*Huey*)
Jin Hi Soucy, Richie Dye, Chad Darnell (*patrons*)
Natalie Hendrix, Gregg Jarrett, Doug Weathers (*television anchorpersons*)
Jeremy Cooper, Beth Eckard, Brad Huffines, Patrick Prokop,
Mike Manhattan, David Jordan, George Lyndel Brannen,
Gregory F. Pallone, Alice Stewart, Vanessa Young (*television field reporters*)
Alyson E. Beasley, Angela Beasley (*puppeteers*)
Scott Troughton (*dredge worker*)
Grace Tootle (*gas station attendant*)
Shane James (*Ricky Butch Banks*)
Herb Kelsey, William L. Thorp IV (*Doss gang members*)

USA 1997 114 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
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
3 Women Mon 12 Jul 20:20
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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