



**ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER**

# Gosford Park

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

After unleashing an earthquake on Los Angeles in *Short Cuts* and a mini-typhoon on Savannah in *The Gingerbread Man*, Robert Altman begins *Gosford Park* (his first film set in the UK) with a simple rainstorm. Given the British obsession with the weather, it's a clever conceit, one that allows the director to expose the iniquities of the class system in the 1930s without having to resort to dialogue. Constance, Countess of Trentham (played, with an hauteur worthy of Dame Edith Evans, by Maggie Smith) is about to climb into her car. Mary, her new maid, has to stand by in the downpour until her mistress is safely ensconced. Even then, she is not allowed to sit alongside her employer. This, then, is a society in which the rich stay dry while their servants get wet.

A comedy of manners with a murder mystery thrown in, *Gosford Park* comes billed as Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* crossed with Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians*. Not that Altman – who cooked up the idea with producer Bob Balaban and commissioned the screenplay from actor/writer Julian Fellowes – is especially interested in abiding by genre rules. His real focus here is sexual and social conspiracy among the guests gathered at the country estate of businessman Sir William McCardle and their servants. Robbed of a generation by World War I, hit by the decline of the Empire, baffled by modernity (whether embodied by Hollywood or by the moves to emancipate women), the aristocrats depicted here are in a state of siege. The reason they place such emphasis on etiquette is – Altman implies – precisely because their way of life is under threat. In one telling sequence, around the time of the murder of Sir William, the composer Ivor Novello, a real-life figure played here by Jeremy Northam, plays a medley of songs at the piano in the drawing room. The servants, all drawn to the music, abandon their duties. As they stand on staircases and lean against doors to listen, it's as if they're taking over the house where – above stairs at least – they have previously seemed invisible.

It's easy to see why Altman included Novello. As a matinee idol, he can cross the boundaries between the classes. (It's significant that the only other character seemingly at home in both parts of the house is also an actor, albeit one masquerading as a valet.) The aristocrats sneer at Novello because he is a teacher's son, but they're also intrigued by the glamorous world he comes from. He understands his own ambiguous status. 'How do you put up with these people,' his Hollywood-producer friend asks him after being exposed to a few chilly draughts of snobbery and anti-Semitism. 'You forget,' Novello replies, 'I earn my living by impersonating them.'

As in so many of his best movies, Altman has a vast ensemble cast at his disposal. The haughty peers, slatternly maids and bossy housekeepers could easily have been turned into caricatures, but Altman eschews P.G. Wodehouse-style comedy, and instead strives to give characters with only a handful of lines psychological depth. There's something touchingly absurd about the way Sir William's valet keeps on serving him even after he's dead, trying to make his corpse comfortable. The stony-faced butler seems much more sympathetic after he drinks himself senseless in fear of his war record as

a conscientious objector becoming public. Above stairs, the quiet desperation of Meredith, the ex-officer turned businessman threatened with ruin, evokes as much pathos as contempt. Maggie Smith's Grande Dame, too, has her moment of frailty, when she thinks Sir William is about to stop her allowance. Even the detested Sir William occasionally seems more sinned against than sinning.

Altman is far too subtle and insightful a filmmaker simply to dismiss the aristocrats as contemptible and to idealise the servants. Each world provides a distorted reflection of the other. Strangely, the servants cling to the rules of behaviour as stubbornly as their employers. There are further layers of irony. The aristocrats, for instance, whose eccentric habits would take a team of social anthropologists a small eternity to unravel, regard the antics of anyone outside their set, especially the Hollywood producer, as wilfully bizarre. And despite being cosseted by a small army of maids and butlers, they're the ones who always seem exhausted: in one telling aside, the Countess of Trentham wearily complains about 'breaking in' a new maid.

Altman is clearly fascinated by the mechanics of country house living, giving time to such things as the strictly defined division of labour between different servants and the myriad tasks that must be performed for dinner to be served on time. This exacting approach to period detail can, in certain costume pictures, have a deadening effect on performance. But here Altman brings an improvisatory approach to dialogue and narrative, his camera flitting from character to character as if in search of the most memorable snatch of conversation. In recent years, his trademark polyphonic style (overlapping dialogue, long takes, prowling camerawork) was beginning to look mannered and self-indulgent. *The Gingerbread Man* and *Cookie's Fortune* (both murder mysteries of a sort) and *Dr T & The Women* weren't exactly misfires, but they were far from his best work. That's why *Gosford Park* is such a revelation. Not only does Altman coax superb performances from his actors, whether relative newcomers or sacred monsters of stage and screen, his freewheeling approach also brings new life to that most ossified of genres – the country-house costume drama. This is a quintessentially British movie, but one which only an outsider with Altman's energy could have made.

**Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight and Sound*, February 2002**

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## GOSFORD PARK

*Director:* Robert Altman  
*©/Presented by:* Film Council  
*©:* Zestwick Limited  
*©/Production Company:* Sandcastle 5 Productions  
*Presented by:* Capitol Films  
*Presented in association with:* USA Films  
*Produced in association with:* Chicagofilms, Medusa Film  
*Made with the support of:* UK Film Council Premiere Fund  
*Executive Producers:* Jane Barclay, Sharon Harel, Robert Jones, Hannah Leader  
*Producers:* Robert Altman, Bob Balaban, David Levy  
*Co-producers:* Jane Frazer, Joshua Astrachan  
*Associate Producer:* Julian Fellowes  
*Unit Manager:* Joseph Jayawardena  
*Production Manager:* Tori Parry  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Winnie Wishart  
*Production Accountant:* Alistair Thompson  
*Location Manager:* Sue Quinn  
*1st Assistant Director:* Richard Styles  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Sara Desmond  
*3rd Assistant Director:* Carlos Fidel  
*Director's Assistant:* May Chu  
*Script Supervisor:* Penny Eyles  
*Casting:* Mary Selway  
*Written by:* Julian Fellowes  
*Based upon an idea by:* Robert Altman, Bob Balaban  
*Director of Photography:* Andrew Dunn  
*Camera Operator:* Peter Taylor  
*Focus Pullers:* Brad Larner, Mikael Allen  
*Clapper Loaders:* Paul Wheeldon, Richard Sion Carroll  
*Gaffer:* Pat Grosswendt  
*Grips:* Pat Garrett, Malcolm Huse  
*Stills Photography:* Mark Tillie  
*Digital Effects:* Jim Henson's Creature Shop  
*Special Effects Supervisor:* Stuart Brisdon  
*Special Effects:* United Special Effects  
*Editor:* Tim Squyres  
*1st Assistant Editor:* Amanda Pollack  
*2nd Assistant Editor:* John F. Lyons  
*Production Designer:* Stephen Altman  
*Supervising Art Director:* John Frankish  
*Art Director:* Sarah Hauldren  
*Art Department Co-ordinator:* Shirley Robinson  
*Assistant Art Director:* Matt Gray  
*Set Decorator:* Anna Pinnock  
*Draughtsperson:* Helen Xenopoulos  
*Property Buyer:* Ray Lee, Fergus Clegg  
*Property Master:* David Balfour  
*Construction Manager:* Tony Graysmark  
*Costumes:* Jenny Beavan  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Anna Kot  
*Costume Supervisor:* Clare Spragge  
*Chief Make-up Artist:* Sallie Jaye  
*Make-up Artists:* Deborah Jarvis, Sharon Martin, Kate J. Thompson, Norma Webb  
*Hair Designer:* Jan Archibald  
*Hairdressers:* Anita Burger, Astrid Schikorra, Loulia Shepherd  
*Titles/Opticals:* Cineimage, Steve Boag, Martin Bullard, Matthew Symonds  
*Music:* Patrick Doyle  
*Music Conducted by:* James Shearman  
*Sound Mixer:* Peter Glossop  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Robin O'Donoghue, Richard Street

*Supervising Sound Editor:* Nigel Mills  
*Supervising Dialogue Editor:* Nina Hartstone  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Dinny Powell  
*Studio:* Shepperton Studios

## Cast

### *Above Stairs*

Maggie Smith (*Constance Trentham*)  
Michael Gambon (*William McCordle*)  
Kristin Scott Thomas (*Sylvia McCordle*)  
Camilla Rutherford (*Isobel McCordle*)  
Charles Dance (*Raymond Stockbridge*)  
Geraldine Somerville (*Louisa Stockbridge*)  
Tom Hollander (*Lieutenant Commander Anthony Meredith*)  
Natasha Wightman (*Lavinia Meredith*)  
Jeremy Northam (*Ivor Novello*)  
Bob Balaban (*Morris Weissman*)  
James Wilby (*Freddie Nesbitt*)  
Claudie Blakley (*Mabel Nesbitt*)  
Laurence Fox (*Rupert Standish*)  
Trent Ford (*Jeremy Blond*)  
Ryan Phillippe (*Henry Denton*)

### *Visitors*

Stephen Fry (*Inspector Thompson*)  
Ron Webster (*Constable Dexter*)

### *Below Stairs*

Kelly Macdonald (*Mary MacEachran*)  
Clive Owen (*Robert Parks*)  
Helen Mirren (*Mrs Wilson*)  
Eileen Atkins (*Mrs Croft*)  
Emily Watson (*Elsie*)  
Alan Bates (*Jennings*)  
Derek Jacobi (*Probert*)  
Richard E. Grant (*George*)  
Jeremy Swift (*Arthur*)  
Sophie Thompson (*Dorothy*)  
Meg Wynn Owen (*Lewis*)  
Adrian Scarborough (*Barnes*)  
Frances Low (*Sarah*)  
Joanna Maude (*Renée*)  
Teresa Churcher (*Bertha*)  
Sarah Flind (*Ellen*)  
Finty Williams (*Janet*)  
Emma Buckley (*May*)  
Lucy Cohu (*Lottie*)  
Laura Harling (*Ethel*)  
Tilly Gerrard (*Maud*)  
Will Beer (*Albert*)  
Leo Bill (*Jim*)  
Gregor Henderson Begg (*Fred*)  
John Atterbury (*Merriman*)  
Frank Thornton (*Mr Burkett*)  
Ron Puttock (*Strutt*)  
Adrian Preater (*McCordle's loader*)  
John Cox, Ken Davies, Tony Davies, Steve Markham, Terry Sturmey, Julian Such (*loaders*)  
Alan Bland, Peter Champion, Geoff Double, Robin Devereux, John Fountain, Richard Gamble, Brian Rumsey, George Sherman (*beaters*)  
Widget (*Pip the dog*)

UK/USA 2001© 137 mins

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## 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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