The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

Daub, Peggy; Gomis, Melissa; Hallman, Phil

http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/110220
**Manor House Mystery**

**Gosford Park (2001)**

Gosford Park continues where the series “Upstairs, Downstairs” had gone in the 1970s with a focus on both the rich upperclass and its supporting staff, the many butlers, cooks, and footmen of a grand English estate, all within the context of a murder mystery. In this case, however, even more emphasis is placed on the serving class, for it is only through them that the audience learns details about the characters “above stairs.”

Stephen Altman, Original sketches for sets in Gosford Park. Although outdoor scenes and some above-stairs scenes for Gosford Park were filmed on location at Wrotham Park in Hertfordshire and Syon House near London, the below-stairs scenes were shot on sound stages. The archive contains these watercolor set renderings of the servants’ spaces by Robert Altman’s son, Stephen Altman, who served as Production Designer for the film.

This faxed letter from screenwriter Julian Fellowes to Bob Balaban (actor and co-writer of Gosford Park) was also forwarded to Robert Altman. In it, Fellowes describes his idea for the opening of the film, including a detailed account of chauffeured cars depositing guests at the entrance to the manor house, after which the cameras surprisingly follow staff into the servants’ halls. Fellowes’s interest in pre-war country estates has continued with his current production of Downton Abbey for the BBC and PBS.

Dear Bob,

I met you straight away that I think this is a perfectly surprising idea for a movie, and I’ve been able to get it out of my head since we spoke (which is a little awkward as I am supposed to be working on another project for capital). The illustrations of the pre-war atmosphere, so many homes like Gosford Park were made up of three worlds, that of the servants and that of the ‘family’, could convey such a sense of one overlaid on the other, one that is out of fashion. As we discussed, I have observed the whole thing around us in my mind, and I think this is the central idea of the movie. Wherever in many ‘suits’ (for nobles?) have presented the ordered and elegant house of upper class life, the one should demonstrate the constant turnover and labour that went on backstages to produce it. Each time a servant pushes through the grand bazaar, on steps onto the main landing from the back entrance, even the quality of the sound will reflect the difference of the two worlds, with soft edges muffling the footsteps instead of light steps echoing through the servants’ areas. Here I think the orchestra will be crucial. I intend to use such in the bedroom of the master, with the sound of the running legs and laughter and the clank of glasses and plates replaced in the clank and clang of a working kitchen with a useful mood side to the pots and strikers the range.

The notice of examining these differences through the form and structure of a classic murder thriller is both terrific and extremely witty and I think I would like to take a little further, with conscious suggestions of earlier films, The Houring Party. For instance, in the Great Expectations, why this tone is so in the audience would be distancing the same action from a new angle. Rather than “Romanticism and Gothicism are Dead.”

I hope you enjoy it in England. I don’t have to be here for sure but, for the whole of this evening, that the whole thing is on, I think it probably should be. Like this idea of the first, the timing of the world, so social abnormalities were beginning to break down, while the events are more important and people like the Cadells press home, Lord Brewerbrook and his friends are, same idea that the servants would be behind their groups in 1890. Of course, quite the century before the First World War, such a world of upper class was quite common and one could see it in a film, among the very rich, this way of life continued at least until the second world and, by changing the story, the story may look forward as well as back and have characters more immediate to the future alongside those who belong to the past.

It must be a reasonably grand household as that will be the case to: Butler, cook, housekeeper, etc., the master, a more of a gentleman, simple roads and house personnel. These would be represented by the maids, who are possible leaders of the social workers (at least of the older ones); all of whom, obviously, took their professionals and their names from their employers when away from home, etc., and in this way the story would show the mood of the home in a title. You would also have the mood of the home in the servants’ hall. You would use the servants’ hall to talk about the whole story to a simple audience, who would react after the second world war to the second world war. The second world war to the second world war. The second world war to the second world war. The second world war to the second world war.

I would like to start the film in an apparently conventional manner, very “Agatha Christie” way with guests arriving in chauffeur driven cars at a grand gate of a great house. Although the scenes would play with the driver and the lady’s maid getting into a car rather than the passengers, we would not give too much aware of the change in our story as what we are doing is in the servants’ hall. The heat and humour emerge from the front door and back their way through. Only then in the audience surprised as the camera does, etc., more follow them into the house, instead of me. We would be looking at the servants who take to the house and the footmen crawling a jeweller case or a valuable carriage forks and so on. We accompany them through the back door, engaged with audiences and