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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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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.

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For: Bob Balaban
(8 sheets)

2nd January 2000

Dear Bob,

I must say straight away that I think this is a perfectly marvellous idea for a movie and I have not 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 script for Capitol!). The fascination of that pre-war existence - so recent but so distant from our own - is the idea that two whole, complete worlds, that of the servants and that of the 'families,' could co-exist beneath one roof and yet, like the crossing of two rivers, seldom if ever mingle.

As we discussed, I have churned the whole thing around in my brain and it seems to me that this is the theme note of the movie. Whereas so many films (and novels) have presented the ordered and elegant 'show' of upper class life, this one should demonstrate the constant business and labour that went on backstage to produce it. Each time a servant pushes through the green baize door, or steps onto the main landing from the back staircase, even the quality of the sound will reflect the difference of the two worlds with soft carpets muffling the footsteps instead of linoleum echoing them, with the crackle of burning logs and laughter and the clink of glass and plate instead of the clash and clang of a working kitchen with scullery maids scrubbing at the pots and stoking the range.

The notion of examining these differences through the form and structure of a classic murder thriller is both brilliant and extremely witty and in fact I would like to take it a little further, with conscious suggestions of earlier films, "The Shooting Party" for instance, or "The Orient Express," only this time it is as if the audience were watching the same action from a new angle. Rather like "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead." I

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assume you want it set in England. It doesn't have to be of course but, for the elaborate class etiquette that the whole thing ran on, I think it probably should be. I like your idea of the early 1930s, the twilight of this world, as the social boundaries were beginning to fracture. Money, while not the icon of the present day, had begun to seem uncomfortably important and people like the Canadian press barons, Lord Beaverbrook or Lord Rothermere, were assuming a social importance that would have been beyond their grasp in 1870. Of course, earlier in the century before the First World War, such a scale of living was quite common and one could set it then but, among the very rich, this way of life continued at least until the second war and, by choosing the 30s, the story may look forward as well as back and have characters more fitted to the future alongside those who belong in the past.

It must be a reasonably grand household as that will be the fun of it: Butler, cook, housekeeper, valet, lady's maid, plus a couple of footmen, kitchen maids and house-parlourmaids. These would be supplemented by the maids, valets and possibly loaders of the visitors (at least of the older ones) - all of whom, incidentally, took their precedence and their names from their employers when away from home. So, a countess's maid would sit above the maid of a baronet's wife in the servants' hall. You probably know this. It was a whole defined culture, as precise as a Brahmin ceremony in Bombay, that went on even after the war in various (increasingly rare) houses until it virtually collapsed in the early 1960s - although we do sometimes, amazingly, still get a taste of it in some of the grander houses we stay in. A great aunt of mine who died in 1952 had an indoor staff of twelve right up to the end. One of the maids' duties was to go round the house every evening when the company had retired, removing all electric plugs and placing stoppers in them to prevent 'electrical poisons' from seeping into the rooms. Rather wonderful, no?

I would like to start the film in an apparently conventional who-dunnit, 'Agatha Christie' way with guests arriving in their chauffeured cars at the grand gates of a great house. Although the camera would stay with the driver and the lady's maid sitting next to him rather than the passengers, we would not give too much away as the car draws up at the entrance front where a butler and a pair of footmen are waiting to receive the visitors. The host and hostess emerge from the front door and hail their friends who start up the steps towards them. Only then is the audience surprised as the camera does not, for once, follow them into the house. Instead, we go with the footmen who carry in the bags and the maid clutching a jewel case or a valet carrying guns and sporting gear. We accompany them through the back door, clogged with suitcases and