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.”

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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I must say straight away that I think this is a perfectly superb 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 project right now) The illustrations of the pre-war ambiance – so many of the scenes in the servants’ quarters are close to the novel ‘Adam Bede’. In particular, the contrast with the claustrophobic, cramped quarters above stairs, where the servants’ quarters are usually described as ‘dark and dingy’.

As we discussed, I have planned the whole thing around my head and it seems to me that this is the perfect setup for the movie. Whereas in many films (and novels) the hierarchical structure is maintained throughout the film, in this case, the sense of order is disrupted by the unexpected arrival of the chauffeured cars. Each scene is described in painstaking detail, from the sound of the car’s engine to the rustling of the chauffeur’s coat. The sense of order is disrupted by the unexpected arrival of the chauffeured cars. Each scene is described in painstaking detail, from the sound of the car’s engine to the rustling of the chauffeur’s coat. The contrast with the claustrophobic, cramped quarters above stairs, where the servants’ quarters are usually described as ‘dark and dingy’.

The notice of examining these differences through the form and structure of the classic murder thriller is both brilliant and extremely witty and is that I would like to take it a little further, with conscious suggestions of other films, _The Shining_ for instance, or _The Great Gatsby_. Only then is the audience prepared to see the scene from a new angle. Rather like “Rowan and Custard are Dead!”


Stephanie 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 Kent, indoor scenes and interior scenes inside the manor house were filmed at Shepperton Studios. The archive contains these watercolor set renderings of the servants’ quarters by Robert Altman’s son, Stephen Altman, who served as Production Designer for the film.