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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Bouquets & Tomatoes

Throughout his film-making career, Robert Altman's films generated intense reactions. Both professional critics and everyday viewers were often at one end of the scale or the other in terms of loving or hating his work. The "Altman style" with its carefully cultivated unresolved plots, scripts that sounded like ordinary conversation with overlapping voices, and sardonic commentary on the state of the country and world were never "easy" for viewers. Noted critic Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker* came to be a big Altman fan and championed many of his works, but there were also avid fans among ordinary moviegoers, as shown by the fan mail in the archive. Shown here is a sampling of reactions to movies from Altman's early career.

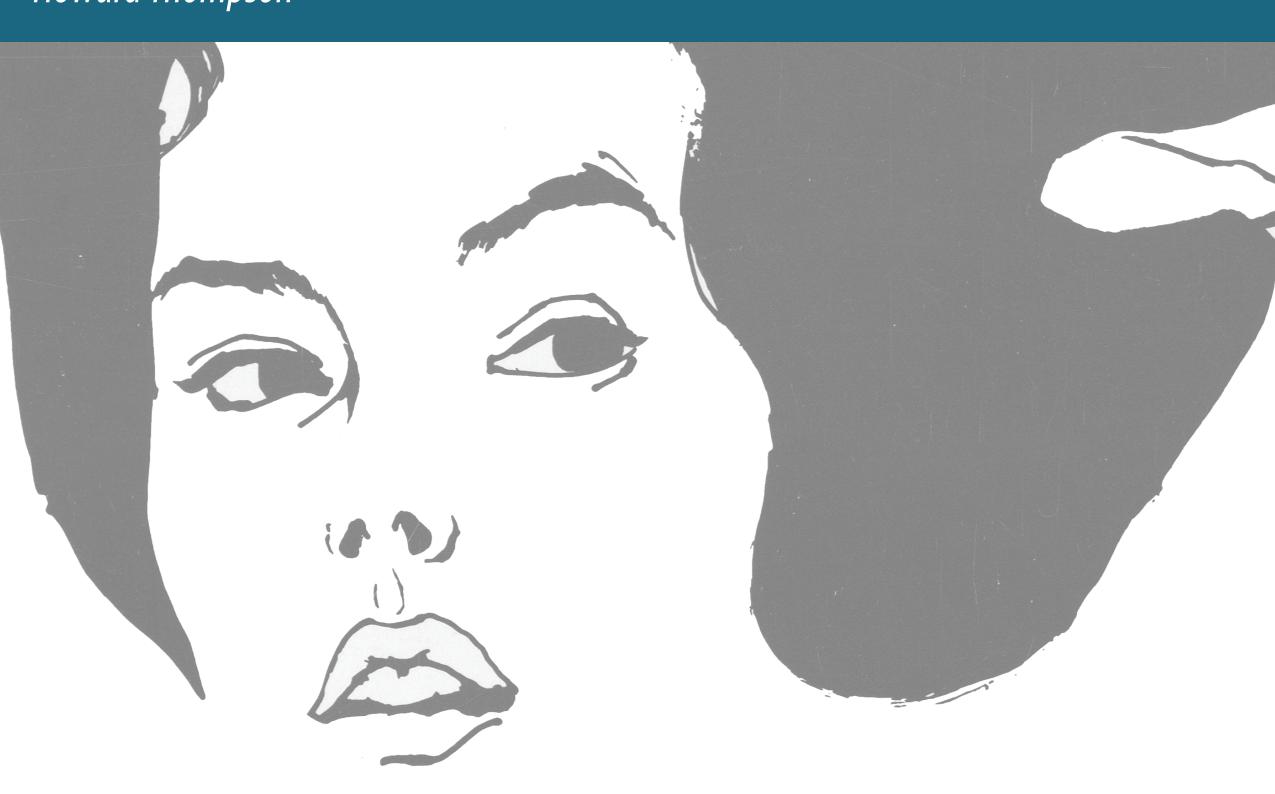
That Cold Day in the Park [1969]

Seemingly, no one who saw Altman's *That Cold Day in the Park* remained neutral. In it, a rich spinster invites a young man from a nearby park to stay at her apartment, then attempts to seduce him. Some thought it was a "brilliant" story with phenomenal actors. Others believed it to be "a piece of psycho-sexual nonsense."

Howard Thompson of the *New York Times* thought the film overly sexually explicit and containing boring characters with no real plot. His review opens:

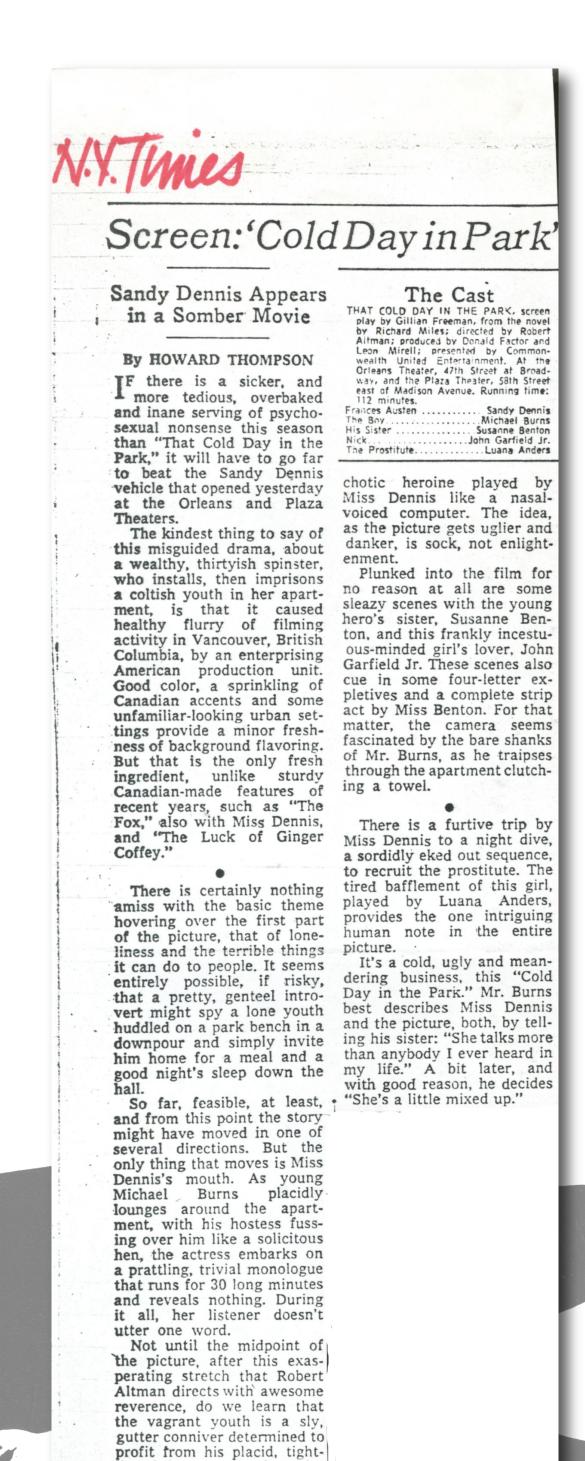
"If there is a sicker, and more tedious, overbaked and inane serving of psycho-sexual nonsense this season than "That Cold Day in the Park" it will have to go far to beat the Sandy Dennis vehicle that opened yesterday at the Orleana and Plaza Theaters."

-Howard Thompson



The film had special significance for readers of the *Vancouver Sun* because it was shot on location there. Wedman was quite positive about the film, saying that Vancouver was proud to have an Altman movie filmed there and hoped he would return. That wish came true when Altman returned to shoot the 1971 *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.

"Altman has an eye for unusual and effective visual images.
... Personality doesn't count with what shows up on the screen but creative know-how does. And Altman certainly has it."
- Les Wedman



Entertainment

of sexual catalyst for her own frustration. The climax

In neither the screen play that Gillian Freeman has de-

shading of sensitivity or warmth bestowed on these singularly unappealing char-

Howard Thompson, "Cold Day in the Park," New York Times, date unknown

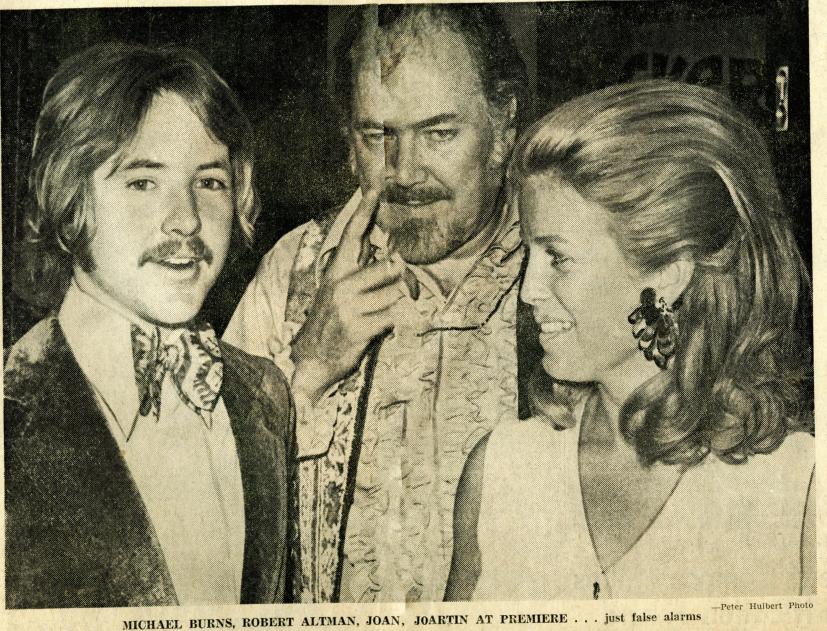
The Sun

That Film Made in Vancouver - Shocking and Great

There were two bomb scares at The Vogue Theatre Thursday night and both A full-house first-night audience came to see That Cold Day in the Park in its It was, however, the most legitimate threat because it's a Vancouver-made the past have been lethal so it has to be pected that Robert Altman's first film Trap and The Sweet and the Bitter bre drama that is not only the best ilm ever made here but is as good as eing ourselves as others see us lways a shock, which is why there still s a certain numbness toward That Cold The fact that he is probably right is urther reason for this reaction to his spinster with a murderous yen for sex.

That Cold Day in the Park is more than that, though. And those who get a ore deeply caught up in a well-deve will drive otherwise rational, balanced In the case of Altman's movie - which more of a happening, an accidental incident recognizable immediately as leading inevitably to fleeting happiness, fierce frustration and then life-long re The story, really, is less important than the people in it. Altman's Hollywood imports, backed by a handful of

experienced Vancouver performers, are



or the first time in an already-illustrious carreer, there is ample opportunity to study her closely. She is a marvelous impersonator and so convincing it's frightening.

When she thinks she has found companionship and physical gratification from a virile hippie half her age, she transforms herself into a youthful beauty. When her treat turns into just another trick, she is left more aroused than ever and his, too is reflected in every word, every emotion she conveys.

Michael Burns comes out of That Cold Day in the Park not only a new star but one of the hottest acting talents around. He is halfway into the picture before uttering a word, which doesn't mean he doesn't say anything.

Every impish smile, and his expressive blue eyes reveal far more than all his spoken lines. He is outstanding as the wily, wild pick-up whose amorous adventure with Miss Dennis begins as a boyish prank and ends up uncontrollably tragic.

Altman has an eye for unusual and effective visual images. He was introduced from the stage as the "most brilliant and personable" director ever to work here. Personality doesn't count with what shows up on the screen but creative know-how does. And Altman certainly has it. His cameraman, Laszlo Kovacx, excells in artistic and meaningful film footage.

There are several scenes in which Miss Dennis and Michael Burns take themselves and the picture to dramatic heights. Altman's vision and Kovacs' support are vital on these occasions.

Local atmosphere is important, too, and here, also, cinematic cliches are avoided.

The mixture of speech patterns and dialects is distracting but, on the whole, supporting actors contribute much to the film. Ted Greenhalgh and Rae Brown

have the most to do and do it exception

ally well.

Les Wedman, "That Film Made in Vancouver - Shocking and Great," *Vancouver Sun*, June 20, 1969